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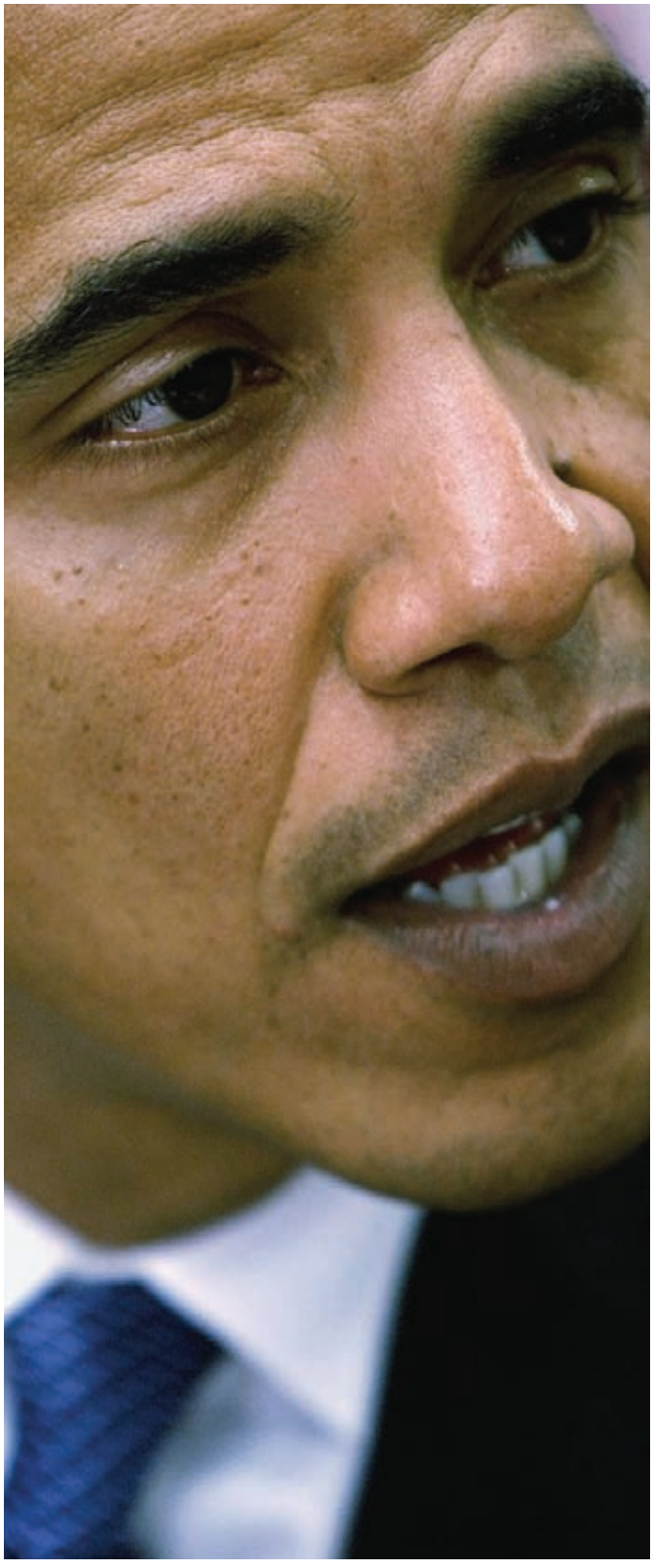

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

A Journal of Politics and the Arts

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Fair Question

THERE ARE MORAL HAZARDS—and then there's just plain morality. Our leaders have deployed the public's money to prop up financial institutions without demanding that the recipients of our largesse bend their objectives toward the public good. We have used the power of the state to salvage banks and corporations without exacting any costs from the executives who trashed those institutions and the whole economic order along with them. And now, with the Geithner bank plan, the government aims to reactivate the credit markets by further enriching private investors.

We don't mean to diminish the necessity of the policies or their ultimate prudence. Bashing Tim Geithner has become a cheap media sport. What, after all, are the alternatives to the current course of action? Perhaps nationalization (or temporary receivership or whatever you want to call it), but that's riddled with logistical complications and not politically plausible at the moment. And there's even a nontrivial chance that Geithner's proposed fixes for the financial system might actually work.

Constructing such unprecedented state interventions—on the fly, without a full grasp of circumstances—is like trying to solve Fermi's paradox on a live game show with the 30-second clock ticking. Given the stakes involved, the first question asked of any policy must be: Does it have a shot at staving off greater financial catastrophe? But the other crucial question is whether it's fair. And, while some on the left have conflated the two—arguing that a policy can't work just because it isn't fair—that shouldn't be a pretext for erasing fairness from the calculus altogether.

It's hard to know how much questions of fairness have been on the administration's brain. The fact that it is proposing the most aggressive regulatory regime in generations is certainly a good sign. But the administration's public rhetoric—a significant force in shaping the conventional wisdom that will emerge from this era—has been strangely tentative when it comes to wrestling with these questions about the beneficiaries of government policy. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the president removed language from his February address to Congress that stated the obvious truth: "Americans are justifiably angry." The president, despite having made similar statements many times before, told his advisers that "he wanted to inject some balance." More recently, Obama has commanded that we not "demonize" Wall Street. But demonization would imply tagging banks and executives with unjust criticisms—and, while there's some of that in the air, why can't the president speak forcefully about the genuine misdeeds of certain players?

The logic driving Obama's rhetorical tepidness boils down to this: If we say too many mean things about investors, then they won't participate in the purchase of toxic assets. This is a strange analysis. The Geithner plan offers investors a sweetheart deal. Investors should jump on it because they stand to make money, regardless of the adjectives Obama affixes to them.

Joe Cassano, former head of AIG Financial Products.

ZUMA/NEWSCOM

No, the president shouldn't become William Jennings Bryan, and he needs to be sensitive to the potential for the public's emotions to run amok. But the success of his presidency and his policies ultimately demands candor. There's some chance that the Geithner program will allow Wall Street to reap handsome rewards from the public's subsidization of its investment, while the government doesn't realize anywhere near the same returns. In other words, if everything doesn't fall the right way, the public could well lash out against the Geithner plan with the same ferocity that it unleashed against the AIG bonuses. Only the president plainly laying out the potential risks of his plans can prevent this ugly scenario and best protect his credibility for the long haul.

His rhetoric matters for another reason, too. There are plenty of ways that government can tamp down the insane levels of executive compensation that contributed to the bubble of the past decade—namely, by closing tax loopholes and implementing "say on pay" laws that empower shareholders. But, in the end, there are limits to government policy. The *culture* of Wall Street must also change, and it will do so only if its denizens are shamed. Larry Summers has done some of this, decrying an environment with "too much greed and too little fear." And, apparently, Rahm Emanuel has done his bit, chewing out the president of Goldman Sachs in a White House meeting, according to the *Journal*. But Barack Obama is the one man in the country with the moral authority to really make this case—to demand that American capitalists act a bit more like citizens of the United States. ◆

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Ethic Cleansing

Whose genocide are you on?

MICHAEL CROWLEY

Are you a former current or former leader of the House of Representatives? Then the government of Turkey wants to talk to you! In recent years, Turkey has hired as lobbyists at least four men who held senior House posts. Currently working Capitol Hill for the Turks is former Democratic leader Richard Gephardt. Schmoozing Republicans is the former House speaker, Dennis Hastert. Hastert was signed up to replace Bob Livingston, a former House speaker-designate (now plying his trade for the Libyans), and former House Republican leader Dick Armey. Steny Hoyer, what are you waiting for? Have you seen Gephardt's new house in Sonoma?

Turkey pays these men handily to defend its many interests in Washington. But one mission overrides all the others: blocking an official U.S. government declaration that the Ottoman Turks committed genocide against the Armenian people at the end of World War I. For years, lobbyists for Turkey have smothered congressional efforts, fueled by America's vocal Armenian community, to pass a resolution recognizing the genocide. They warn that such a blasphemy of Turkey's founding fathers would ignite public outrage there, alienating a moderate Muslim ally and perhaps costing the United States access to an air base vital for Iraq operations. The result has been a classic perennial Washington issue that mostly serves to appease interest groups and enrich lobbyists, much like asbestos reform or tax loophole fights—except, in this case, there are up to 1.5 million murdered innocents involved.

But, as Barack Obama prepares for his upcoming state visit to Ankara in early April and the day of a traditional presidential statement to the Armenian-American community that follows a couple of weeks later, this debate may finally be coming to a head. Obama is the first American president elected after explicitly promising to invoke the dreaded G-word. And, thus, a trip designed to defuse tension between the United States and the Muslim world will have the small matter of genocide culpability hanging over it like a foul odor.

As a candidate, Obama was perfectly clear. "The facts are undeniable," he said in a January 2008 statement. He called the massacre not an allegation or matter of opinion—many Turks maintain that the killing resulted from anarchy accompanying the Ottoman Empire's collapse—but a clear exercise in race-based killing: "As president," he vowed, "I will recognize the Armenian genocide." Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton, who said America's "morality" and "credibility" demanded such a statement, agreed. And why not? Last year, all were presidential candidates looking for easy ways to sound bold and noble, not to mention courting Armenian-American votes and money.

But, now that Obama is in the Oval Office, the world may seem rather more complex than it did on the campaign trail. The smell of capitulation is in the air. "At this moment, our focus is on how, moving forward, the United States can help Armenia and Turkey work together to come to terms with the past," a National Security Council spokesman told the *Los Angeles Times* last week. When a top Turkish official emerged from a recent meeting with National Security Advisor Jim Jones, he sounded sanguine on the question, declining to say whether Obama was standing by his campaign promise, yet adding cheerily that he and Jones "went through all these issues in a very friendly and cooperative manner."

Obama has also been joined by a new cadre of influential advisers. Take his chief of staff. When Congress considered a genocide resolution in late 2007, then-Representative Rahm Emanuel opposed it. The new State Department official with purview over Turkey, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon, has warned about a possible anti-American backlash in Turkey resulting from recognition, and, in 2006, Gordon wrote that "[u]ltimately, historians, not governments, should be the ones to decide these sensitive issues." Jones has close ties to the Turkish military from his time as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. And Obama's defense secretary, Robert Gates, strongly opposed the 2007 resolution, which he feared could result in Turkey cutting off supply lines the United States relies on to support its troops in Iraq.

Obama can be forgiven for dodging the explosive subject of genocide while he is a guest in Ankara next week. But, when the Armenians' annual day of genocide remembrance comes on April 24, the White House will be expected to release a statement. In the past, these proclamations have been exercises in strained euphemism. Last year, for instance, George W. Bush lamented "mass killings and forced exile" and "epic human tragedy"—but did not use the term "genocide." The Armenian-Americans who supported Obama in November (John McCain never endorsed genocide recognition) expect him to use the occasion to say the magic word.

But sources on Capitol Hill and those familiar with Ankara's thinking both predict Obama will punt on the issue. "I fully expect him to fold," laments one human rights activist who wishes otherwise. "I would be shocked if he didn't." But the real shock should be in seeing Obama break such a clear promise. Reasonable people can differ on whether recognizing the genocide is worth the possible consequences. It is not debatable, however, that Obama made a promise, or that he ran as a man of integrity and principle. To be sure, Obama's high-minded rhetoric has always concealed a deeply rooted pragmatism (think of the convenient difference between troops and "combat troops" in Iraq). But there is a line between pragmatism and hypocrisy, and Obama may be about to cross it.

Last week, Aram Hamparian, the genial executive director of the Armenian National Committee of America, sat in his Dupont Circle town-house office surrounded by books with titles like *The Banality of Denial* and *Blood and Soil* and recounted how his grandparents had been forced out of their villages by the Ottomans and marched through the Syrian Desert. Hamparian said he wasn't nervous that the cause he has worked on for years will once again lose out to Turkey's strategic clout. "The basic civics-class understanding of the situation should be that folks run for office on a certain promise, and they should govern that way," Hamparian said. Hopelessly naïve words? In Barack Obama's Washington, they shouldn't be. ◆

TRB
From Washington

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The Mall

Blowing Sunshine

The happiness scholar who wants to save conservatism.

On a warm night in early March, Arthur Brooks was having a Cinderella moment. A constellation of Washington's conservative superstars and their fellow travelers had packed the Hilton Washington's International Ballroom for the annual black-tie gala of the American Enterprise Institute, or "neocon prom," as it's commonly called. The presence of so many of Washington's conservative cognoscenti would have been enough to make any right-leaning fanboy swoon: Newt Gingrich leaning in for a photo with Michael Barone, David Frum glad-handing a mustachioed G. Gordon Liddy, and Dick and Lynne Cheney arriving with a Secret Service detail in tow. But this year's prom was an occasion of even greater excitement for Brooks, who became president of the organization in January. That night, the lanky 44-year-old former public policy professor gave the first of two introductions for his idol, Charles Murray, the recipient of AEI's Irving Kristol award (a lifetime achievement award for neocons). As they prepared to take the stage, Brooks turned to Murray, like the overexcited prom king he was, and gushed, "Charles! I can't believe I get to introduce you!"

Brooks's man-crush on Murray originates not only in shared ideological tendencies, but from a shared penchant for pure, sunny, against-all-odds cheeriness. Murray's lecture that night, "The Happiness of the People," argued that the American distaste for social programs is more conducive to happiness than Europe's social democratic model. Of course, AEI doesn't seem like a natural home for a lecture on happiness—much less for a president who made his name studying the social science of happiness, as Brooks did. As the intellectual cradle of the movement—the birthplace of the Iraq war plan and a stalwart defender of the free market—AEI will inevitably be the battleground for the fight over its future. The movement's factions, which have largely sublimated their differences during the past eight years, are now ready to brawl, and a reckoning must be made with the excesses and shortcomings of the Bush era. It's serious intellectual business. In Brooks, however, AEI has chosen a leader who often sounds more like the editor of *Tiger Beat*, free-enterprise edition, than the referee of an all-out GOP cage match. Brooks is no warrior, not even a happy warrior: He's just happy.

Brooks's beatitude shines out even on a first meeting. Despite his all-American obsession with free enterprise, his appearance places him into the Buckley-esque dandified wing of the conservative movement, with houndstooth wool pants, jewel-tone cuff links, wireless glasses, and closely cropped hair. One former colleague from Syracuse University remembers learning with shock that Brooks was a conservative: "I thought he was a Marxist, with the glasses and the European look." Brooks didn't picture this future for himself, either. As he admitted to me, when we had coffee in his downtown D.C. office, about his circuitous career, "It's not exactly a typical path, but this is a really great country." Then he turned his free-market zeal on me: "You, for example, you're going to have a great life. That's the gift that a free economy gives us!"

Certainly, Brooks has received many gifts from the free economy. In 1992, having just returned to the United States from a stint in the Barcelona City Orchestra,

WHITE HOUSE WATCH *With* **DREW FRIEDMAN**

You're a good man, Timothy Geithner.

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he was teaching the French horn to music students in Florida while pursuing his bachelor's degree via correspondence courses from a college in New Jersey. As he was finishing his degree and trying to figure out what he'd do with it, he discovered *The Bell Curve*, Murray's controversial screed on race and IQ, and had an epiphany: "I want to be a social scientist!"

After college, Brooks, who had had no previous ideological bent, pursued his masters in economics while "morphing into this AEI fan." He whipped through a Ph.D. at the Rand Corporation by 34 and joined the faculty of Syracuse University a few years later. His second book, *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism*, argues that conservatives are more likely to give to charity than liberals. The book earned plaudits from the likes of Harvey Mansfield and Bill O'Reilly, and it had richer rewards as well—Brooks and his wife were inspired by his research to adopt a baby from China.

In 2007, not long after the book's release, AEI approached Brooks about joining as a visiting scholar. When he arrived and found his name on a door plaque, he took a picture of it on his cell phone and sent it to his wife ("I'm such a geek!"). While there, he finished *Gross National Happiness*, a breakdown of social survey data proving that, on average, conservatives tend to be happier because their values—the practice of religion, marriage, and a belief in hard work—correlate with higher self-reports of happiness. Conservatives have always been happier, Brooks argued, "even during Clinton's sex scandals, when grim conservative spokespeople looked like they had just stepped out of Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic*." *The New York Times* invited Brooks to unpack his findings on their *Freakonomics* blog, and *The Economist* called the book "a subtle and engaging distillation of oceans of data."

In late 2007, when AEI President Christopher DeMuth announced that he was ready to return to the scholarly life, Brooks seemed like an obvious choice to succeed him. "He clearly really loved AEI," DeMuth says. Which could be an understatement: "It's actually hard leading this organization," Brooks told me, "because I idolize these people and I have to be a leader, and I say, 'Oh my god, can I have lunch with you?' And they say, 'Yeah, of course, you're the president!' "

But it's not just the "respect and deference" to AEI's scholars, as one of his staffers put it, that has everyone so excited. Conservatives are looking for a new mode of leadership, and some of the movement's most important people are hoping they've found one in Brooks's eternal optimism. "It's not just AEI, it's the whole conservative movement," Newt Gingrich told me. "When you go back and watch Reagan, you realize how optimistic, how happy and positive he was. He wasn't an angry conservative: He believed in the potential of America. In many ways, Arthur brings that same calm, deep belief in America, in a way that is very desirable."

Of course, these days, most conservative leaders still do look like the glum, pitchfork-wielding subjects of *American Gothic*—if anything, they look even more incensed. Just days after I talked to Gingrich, he appeared on "The O'Reilly Factor" to lament that "the American people are increasingly unhappy." Compare that with Brooks's assessment: "I think in a way that it's much better for the free-enterprise movement that Obama did win. . . . This is why AEI was made, for a time like this. . . . What a great thing! It's great."

That's the kind of spirit that might serve him well as he guides AEI through not just a recession of conservative ideas, but an actual recession. AEI has already downsized its cast of fellows (though not, they say, for financial reasons), and the staff and scholars recently took pay cuts. But laying off wonks is nothing compared to leading them. "He could be out in six months, if folks on the right don't like what he's doing," says a close friend. That might be a bit overheated—think tanks tend to move with the speed of actual tanks when it comes to personnel matters. Still, if there's one thing that could give Arthur Brooks a bad day, it's being forced to confront the grouchy, drawn-out twilight of his longtime idols. If he's still smiling in six months, it'll truly be a feat of happiness studies.

Marin Cogan

Pox Britannica

English anti-Semitism on the march.

"England's made a Jew of me in only eight weeks," says Nathan Zuckerman on the last page of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*. It is not meant to be a compliment. What makes a Jew of Zuckerman is the "strong sense of difference" the English induce in him, a "latent and pervasive" anti-Semitism, rarely rampantly expressed except for a "peculiarly immoderate, un-English-like Israel-loathing."

At the time—*The Counterlife* was published in England in 1987—Zuckerman's account of Anglo-Jewish relations struck an English-born Jew like me as a mite thin-skinned. It was possible that an American Jew detected what we did not, but more likely that he detected what was not there. Whatever the truth of it, a comfortable existence was better served by assuming the latter. We all had our own tales of anti-Semitism to tell—my grandmother's headstone, for example, had just been defaced with a swastika in a skinhead raid on a Jewish cemetery in Manchester—but mainly they were isolated, low-level acts of idle vandalism or reflexes of minor intolerance, more comic than alarming, and not personal, however you viewed them. Apart, that is, from the Israel-loathing, but then that wasn't—was it?—to be confused with anti-Semitism.

Twenty years on, it is difficult to imagine Nathan Zuckerman lasting eight days in England, let alone eight weeks. There is something in the air here, something you can smell, but also, in a number of cases, something more immediately affronting to Jews. It is important not to exaggerate. Most English Jews walk safely through their streets, express themselves freely, enjoy the friendship of non-Jews, and feel no less confidently a part of English life than they ever have. Organizations monitoring anti-Jewish incidents in England have reported a dramatic increase after Gaza: the daubing of slogans such as "kill the Jews" on walls and bus shelters in Jewish neighborhoods, abuse of Jewish children on school playgrounds, arson attacks on synagogues, physical assaults on Jews conspicuous by their yarmulkes or *shtreimels*. But, while these incidents ought not to be treated blithely, they are still exceptional occurrences.

And yet, in the tone of the debate, in the spirit of the national conversation about Israel, in the slow seepage of familiar anti-Semitic calumnies into the conversation—there, it seems to me,

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one can find growing reason for English Jews to be concerned. Mindless acts of vandalism come and go; but what takes root in the intellectual life of a nation is harder to identify and remove. Was it anti-Semitic of the Labour politician Tam Dalyell to talk of Jewish advisers excessively influencing Tony Blair's foreign policy? Was it anti-Semitic of the Liberal Democrat Baroness Tonge to refer to the "financial grips" that the pro-Israel lobby exerts on the world? Such allusions to a pro-Israel conspiracy of influence and wealth, usually accompanied by protestations of innocence in regard to Jews themselves—"I am sick of being accused of anti-Semitism," Baroness Tonge has said, "when what I am doing is criticizing Israel"—have become the commonplaces of anti-Israel discourse in the years since Philip Roth wrote *The Counterlife*. And, whatever their intention, their gradual effect has been to normalize, under cover of criticism of Israel, assumptions that 50 years ago would have been exclusively the property of overt Jew-haters. The peculiarly immoderate Israel-loathing that Roth remarked upon in 1987 is now a deranged revulsion, intemperate and unconcealed, which nothing Israel itself has done could justify or explain were it ten times the barbaric apartheid state it figures as in the English imagination.

Demonstrators against Israel's operation in Gaza carried placards demanding an end to the "massacre" and the "slaughter." There was no contesting this rhetoric of wanton destruction versus helpless innocence. Hamas rockets counted for nothing, Hamas's record of endangering its own civilian population counted for nothing, Amnesty reports were cited when they incriminated Israel but ignored when they incriminated others. Whatever was not massacre was not news, nor was it germane. The distinguished British film director Ken Loach dismissed a report on the rise of anti-Semitism across Europe as designed merely to "distract attention" from Israel's military crimes. An increase in anti-Semitism is "perfectly understandable," Loach said, "because Israel feeds feelings of anti-Semitism." Scrupulously refusing the Holocaust-Gaza analogy, Robert Fisk, writing in *The Independent* a few weeks ago, nonetheless argued that "a Palestinian woman and her child are as worthy of life as a Jewish woman and her child on the back of a lorry in Auschwitz"—at a stroke reinstating the analogy while implying that Jews need to be reminded that not only Jewish lives are precious. And a columnist for the populist newspaper *The Daily Mirror* has taken this imputation of callousness a stage further, writing of the "1,314 dead Palestinians temporarily sat[ing] Tel Aviv's bloodlust."

Coincidentally, or not, a ten-minute play by Caryl Churchill—accusing Jews of the same addiction to blood-spilling—has recently enjoyed a two-week run at the Royal Court Theatre in London and three performances at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. *Seven Jewish Children* declares itself to be a fund-raiser for Gazans. Anyone can produce it without paying its author a fee, so long as the seats are free and there is a collection for the beleaguered population of Gaza after the performance.

Think of it as 1960s agitprop—the buckets await you in the foyer and you make your contribution or you don't—and it is no more than the persuaded speaking to the persuaded. But propaganda turns sinister when it pretends to be art. Offering insight into how Jews have got to this murderous pass—the answer is the Holocaust: we do to others what others did to us—*Seven Jewish Children* finishes almost before it begins in a grotesque tableau of blood-soaked triumphalism: Jews reveling in the deaths of Palestinians, laughing at dying Palestinian policemen, rejoicing in the slaughter of Palestinian babies.

Churchill has expressed surprise that anyone should accuse her of invoking the blood libel, but, even if one takes her surprise at face value, it only demonstrates how unquestioningly integral to English leftist thinking the bloodlust of the Israeli has become. Add to this Churchill's decision to have her murder-mad Israelis justify their actions in the name of "the chosen people"—as though any Jew ever yet interpreted the burden of "chosenness" as an injunction to kill—and we are back on old and terrifying territory. And this not in the brute hinterland of English life, where swastikas are drawn the wrong way round and "Jew" is not always spelled correctly, but at the highest level of English culture.

Again it is important not to exaggerate. *Seven Jewish Children* has not by any means received universal acclaim. Parodies of it seem to turn up on the Internet almost every day. But there is no postulate so far-fetched that it can't smuggle itself into even the best newspapers as truth. The eminent *Guardian* theater critic Michael Billington, for example,

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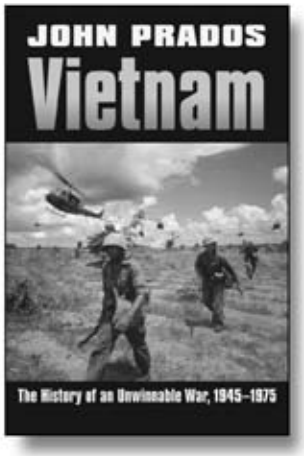
—**Marilyn B. Young**, author of *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*



"Few if any historians know the Vietnam records as well as Prados. His provocative new book should be read by the lawmakers and opinion leaders who habitually babble on about the 'lessons of the Vietnam War.'"
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took Churchill's words in the spirit in which they were uttered, believing that she "shows us how Jewish children are bred to believe in the 'otherness' of Palestinians." *Jewish* children, note. But then it's *Jewish* children whom Caryl Churchill paints as brainwashed into barbarity. Without, I believe, any intention to speak ill of Jews, and innocently deaf to the odiousness of the word "bred" in this context, Billington demonstrates how easily language can sleepwalk us into bigotry.

The premise of *Seven Jewish Children* is a fine piece of fashionable psychobabble that understands Zionism as the collective nervous breakdown of the Jewish people; instead of learning the humanizing lesson of the Holocaust—whatever that might be, and whatever the even greater obligation on non-Jews to learn it too—Jews vent their instability on the Palestinians in imitation of what the Nazis vented on them. This is a theory that assumes what it offers to prove, namely how like Nazis Israelis have become. Furthermore, it dispossesses Jews of their own history, turning the Holocaust into a sort of retrospective retribution, Jews being made to pay the price then for what Israelis are doing now. Clearly, this exists at a more extreme end of the continuum of willed forgetting than Holocaust denial itself, its ultimate object being to break the Jew-Holocaust nexus altogether. Let us no longer deny the Holocaust, let us rather redistribute the pity. If there is a victim of the Holocaust today, it is the people of Gaza.

Given how hard it is to distinguish Jew from Israeli in all this, the mantra "It is not anti-Semitic to be critical of Israel" looks increasingly disingenuous. But there is no challenging it, not even with such eminently reasonable responses as, "That surely depends on the criticism," or "Calling into question an entire nation's right to exist is not exactly 'criticism.'" Nor is the distinction between Israeli and Jew much respected where the graffitists and the baby bullies of the schoolyard do their work. But, in the end, it is frankly immaterial how much of this is Jew-hating or not. The inordinacy of English Israel-loathing—ascribing to a country the same disproportionate responsibility for the world's ills that was once ascribed to a people—is toxic enough in itself. The language of extremism has a malarious dynamic of its own, passing effortlessly from the mischievous to the unwary, and from there into the bloodstream of society. And that's what one can smell here. Infection.

HOWARD JACOBSON

Howard Jacobson is the author, most recently, of THE ACT OF LOVE.

Take Off

What Barack Obama can learn from JetBlue.

HOW LONG has it been since you felt warm and fuzzy about auto companies, airlines, and banks? If you're like most of us, the answer is probably quite a while. But plenty of companies in these industries want you to know they feel your pain. Hyundai is promising that if you lose your job or your small business declares bankruptcy, you can return the new Korean speedster you financed or leased—no strings attached. JetBlue's "Promise Program" will provide a full refund if you book a flight and then lose your full-time job. And Bank of America will cancel mortgage payments for up to a year in the case of involuntary job loss.

A surprising number of corporate giants are suddenly making affectionate offers like these. And, while they're surely trying to burnish their tarnished images, they're also making a hard-headed business decision: With family incomes increasingly uncertain, companies recognize the need to provide a new economic contract with built-in risk protections to get consumers to purchase their products.

Unfortunately, many politicians and pundits don't seem to be getting the same message: We're not just facing a short-term financial crisis; we are facing a fundamental shift in our economy that has pushed more and more risk onto Americans' backs. And the only way to give working families the confidence they need to make the investment and spending choices on which their—and our economy's—future depends is to rethink our nation's social contract, to rebalance risks and rewards in American capitalism.

WE'VE BEEN following the corporate "buy-now-pay-never" movement with more than a passing interest. That's because, for the last few years, we have also been closely examining what economists call "income volatility": the up-and-down fluctuations in what families bring in through work, investments, and government and private benefit programs. Our main finding is that family incomes are lot less stable than they used to be. In particular, the chance that families will experience catastrophic drops in their income has risen dramatically over the last generation. In the data source we have used, the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the chance that a working-age individual will experience a drop of at least 50 percent in family income over a two-year period has more than doubled from around 4 percent in the early 1970s to almost 10 percent in the early 2000s. The risk of at least one 50-percent drop in income over a five-year period has grown from about 15 percent in the early 1970s to about 23 percent in recent years.

Recessions exacerbate the problem

ROBERT NEUBECKER

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substantially: Every recession since the early 1980s has ratcheted up the risk of a big income loss, with the relatively mild recession of 2001 producing income swings greater than those seen during the deep twin downturns of the early '80s. Now that we're facing a recession potentially far worse than that of the early '80s, it is safe to assume—though the data does not yet exist—that the instability of family incomes in the next few years will dwarf anything our nation has seen for decades.

What's more, the profile of the economically unstable is also changing. The job insecurity that once affected only the working poor is reaching into higher echelons of the labor market. Over the last generation, income instability grew faster among college-educated Americans than among those with just a high school degree. (And, no, it is not driven by the increase in the number of working married women who leave the workforce for short periods to have or raise children—the rise in income volatility has occurred among single workers as well as two-earner couples.)

When we first started sounding alarms over these findings, critics countered that they simply reflected a risk-reward trade-off. Sure, people were taking on more income instability, but the return was higher wages and incomes. But who can believe that now? Increased income insecurity has occurred alongside slow (or no) income growth for all but the richest of Americans—among the well-educated as well as the poorly educated. In that same period, middle-class incomes barely grew at all, and what little growth did occur came only because families were putting in more hours of work. And what did they get in return? Less predictable paychecks, less comprehensive health insurance, less secure retirement savings, all adding up to family finances perched on the brink. The risk-reward trade-off looks more like a risk-reward rip-off.

The other common response when we warned of income instability was, "Don't worry, people can borrow to smooth their incomes." And, indeed, people did borrow, spurred on by a Wild West system of consumer lending whose irresponsible practices were heralded under the banner of "financial innovation." Some of the explosion of consumer debt was the result of overspending and poor financial planning, but much of it simply reflected the reality that families were taking on more risk—shouldering a precarious burden of mortgage, credit card, and tuition-related debt—without much higher earnings or a better public safety net to cushion the blow.

Now, of course, some help is on the way through the economic recovery package. But, without a major shift in America's approach to social policy, the "new normal" that materializes whenever we emerge from the current recession will be characterized by a persistent and increased risk of catastrophic income loss. The fundamental problem is that we have a framework of social insurance premised on the world of two or three generations ago—a world of strong unions, globally invulnerable companies, modest health care costs, manufacturing jobs that don't require a college degree, and parents (read: moms) capable of serving as all-purpose safety nets within the home.

Today's world requires a different set of assumptions. America's globally integrated economy means less job security, more mobility, and ever-higher skills requirements for workers. Health care and education costs are rising. With most families relying on two incomes, the cost of caregiving is a real and growing pressure on millions of families struggling to support both young children and elderly parents. The combination of these rising costs and a volatile labor market means that families need to be continually prepared for change. For too long, we've left them to go it alone, and we're seeing the disastrous consequences of that approach today.

The time has come for a coherent policy strategy that retools Roosevelt's "cradle-to-grave" social insurance vision for today's realities. To begin with, we need an updated focus on income protection, which motivated the New Dealers but has not been seriously revisited in the many decades since. Our 1930s-era unemployment insurance system, for instance, covers only around one-third of unemployed workers and benefits often run out before workers find new jobs. It provides little help with the crucial skills training that today's unemployed need. And it utterly fails women balancing work and family as well as part-time, low-wage, and contingent workers—the very workers most in need of protection.

Provisions in the stimulus bill aimed at modernizing the unemployment insurance system will help rectify these problems, but, absent a major overhaul, unemployment insurance will remain patently inadequate to the employment insecurities of our day. Job loss is a risk faced by all workers, and that means unemployment insurance must be truly universal, with strong national standards and improved long-term funding. And unemployment benefits, valuable as they are, must be tied to a reformed job-training system that supports workers' efforts to retool their skills.

Job loss, however, is not the only risk to income faced by today's working family. Paid sick days and parental leave would greatly alleviate the financial risk of parenthood—a leading cause of poverty spells in America today. The ultimate goal should be basic income protection available, on a progressive and proactive basis, for a wide range of economic shocks. As a starting point, the Earned Income Tax Credit could be made a better source of income insurance, keeping families afloat when economic disasters strike, rather than a retroactive tax refund for the working poor.

Meanwhile, in health insurance and other core areas of economic security, we need to move away from reliance on tax-subsidized workplace benefits, freeing corporations to focus on their core mission of bolstering employment and productivity. Health care comes first, but our nation's retirement system is also in serious need of repair to lessen the burden of retirement income risk and long-term health care on workers and employers. (Frighteningly, the implosion of job-based benefits does not even show up in our measure of instability, since we are looking only at family incomes of working-age adults, not their expenses or retirement experiences.)

In short, we need to rebalance the risk-reward trade-off. Otherwise, we may find ourselves where many corporations are today: facing scared Americans who won't invest in the future. Instead of buyer protection plans offered by the private sector, we need a worker protection plan spearheaded by government. American capitalism has not shown us how to do much right lately. But the latest flash of corporate benevolence casts a small bright light on the path to broader security and opportunity for all Americans.

Jacob S. Hacker and Elisabeth Jacobs

Jacob S. Hacker is professor of political science and co-director of the Center for Health, Economic, and Family Security at U.C. Berkeley. Elisabeth Jacobs is the American Sociological Association's Congressional Fellow.

ANTHONY RUSSO

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Top Down

A new theory of the AIG catastrophe.

NOAM SCHEIBER

What went wrong at AIG? Since the uproar over the firm's bonuses, it's become fashionable to distinguish between the masters of the universe at AIG Financial Products, the subsidiary that nearly torched the global economy, and the working stiffs at the rest of the company. So compelling is this dichotomy, in fact, that even the AIG basher-in-chief has invoked it. "You've got a company, AIG, which used to be just a regular old insurance company," President Obama explained during his recent "Tonight Show" appearance. "Then they decided—some smart person decided—let's put a hedge fund on top of the insurance company and let's sell these derivative products to banks all around the world."

There's clearly something to this. At the very least, the marriage between the two was hardly a natural fit. The derivatives-meisters worked in lavish digs, had Ph.D.s from prestigious universities, and made gobs of money using powerful computer models. The insurance men hailed from no-name schools and prided themselves on paying less in claims then they collected in premiums. "It was different. That's why we never had them in the building," recalls Hank Greenberg, who ran AIG for more than 35 years before resigning in 2005.

But, these differences notwithstanding, it actually *was* pretty smart to put a hedge fund on top of an insurance company—at least for a while. For more than 15 years, the arrangement racked up big profits for AIG without exposing it to excessive losses. The real problem was more fundamental: Companies that deal in risk have a natural tendency to take on too much of it, whether they're arranging homeowner's policies or elaborate arbitrages. Over time, a steady march of profits desensitizes them to the dangers they once sweated; even institutional checks begin to weaken.

Which is why the difference between a successful risk enterprise and an unsuccessful one often has less to do with the complexity of its schemes than with its leaders' fanaticism about discipline. It was, among other things, the lack of such leadership at AIG in recent years that made the company a ward of the state.

AIG Financial Products began life in the mind of Howard Sosin, a Stanford-trained Ph.D. who once worked with junk-bond king Michael Milken at Drexel Burnham Lambert. In the mid-1980s, Sosin dreamt of leaving Drexel to start a company that would accept risk from people looking to unload it in exchange for a hefty fee. For example, a state government might pay Sosin's hypothetical firm to lock in an interest rate so as to avoid a potential increase down the road. (The contract, known as a "swap," would obligate Sosin to offset a higher interest payment, but allow him to pocket the difference if the interest payment fell.) Sosin would then turn around and unload the risk himself using a series of contracts called hedges, so that he would make money regardless of which way interest rates moved.

The only catch was that, in order to arrange all these contracts on favorable terms, Sosin needed the financial backing of an extremely reliable, deep-pocketed benefactor. When Sosin went looking for one, an associate put him in touch with former Connecticut senator Abraham Ribicoff—a friend of Greenberg's. Ribicoff brokered an introduction, and, in early 1987, the two men settled on a joint venture: Sosin would furnish the nerds and the algorithms, Greenberg would provide his company's triple-A rating, and the two sides would share the profits.

In the early days, many within AIG viewed Sosin's methods as something akin to alchemy. The AIG officials nominally overseeing his operation knew almost nothing about swaps, and they were dismissive of what they didn't understand. But, within months, AIG-FP was bringing in tens of millions of dollars. Suddenly, top AIG officials took notice. Worse, in light of all the revenue, it began to dawn on Sosin's AIG overseers that his terms were overly generous. "AIG probably thought, 'This thing—it's some Drexel wise guy. It'll make a little bit of money,'" recalls a former AIG-FP employee. "Instead, the thing was minting money. Suddenly … [it was like]: 'You cut what kind of deal with him?'"

Over the next few years, Greenberg and AIG would revisit their contract with Sosin, but to little avail. Still, for all the haggling about money, the bigger divide was cultural. Greenberg was famously hard-charging, but he had modest tastes. He'd lived in an unremarkable three-bedroom apartment on Park Avenue for years after becoming CEO. His three sons had shared a single bedroom when they came home from college or boarding school. By contrast, Sosin's primary residence was a five-story mansion replete with elevator, squash court, and indoor pool, according to a *Wall Street Journal* article at the time. His neighbors in Fairfield, Connecticut dubbed it "the castle," and he'd paid a king's ransom for it—$5 million in cash.

Some of these differences bubbled over into business philosophy. Greenberg's was fundamentally conservative; Sosin's less so. For example, it was customary to offer large signing bonuses to lure executives from investment banks. Sosin was obliging, but Greenberg opposed this on principle and went along only grudgingly. Greenberg also wanted more of a say over major deals, something the independent-minded Sosin fought.

By 1993, the partnership was over. Greenberg had been gradually building a team of replacements, and, when Sosin balked at another proposed renegotiation, the two sides went their separate ways. A lawsuit stemming from the breakup revealed that AIG-FP had made more than $1 billion in profits between 1987 and 1992—a staggering sum in those days.

Greenberg put AIG-FP on a tighter leash after Sosin's departure, but several of Sosin's top lieutenants stayed behind, and its character remained intact. According to a *Washington Post* series in late December, Sosin had created a committee when he launched AIG-FP to vet every single transaction the firm undertook at the close of each day. The idea was to weed out the deals that didn't hold up to withering scrutiny. Under Sosin's successor, a mathematician named Tom Savage,

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the firm continued to apply an "academic rigor" to each deal, Savage told the *Post*.

But, when Savage left in 2001, Greenberg elevated a less obvious candidate to run the unit on his recommendation: Joe Cassano, its chief financial officer. Cassano didn't have a background in math or finance, nor did he have a pedigree to match Sosin or Savage. He'd attended Brooklyn College and made his name at the firm overseeing what the former AIG-FP official calls "plumbing." Cassano supervised the employees who set up contracts and accounts for each deal, who routed payments to the right parties, and who made sure AIG-FP and its customers were honoring their contracts (for example, by posting collateral if necessary). The lawyers and accountants all reported to him.

These were the least glamorous parts of the enterprise, but Cassano performed them ably. Colleagues respected his competence, and Greenberg respected his drive. "He was smart, tough, aggressive. Those are not bad characteristics," Greenberg told me. And, though Cassano sometimes alienated co-workers with his vulgar, in-your-face style, he treated the CEO with genuine reverence. He was fond of telling colleagues about a relative who knew almost nothing about AIG but nonetheless advised him: "Don't ever sell the stock unless something happens to Mr. Greenberg."

Cassano quickly demonstrated an aptitude for, if not financial wizardry itself, then *selling* financial wizardry. One Wall Street analyst recalls attending an AIG "investor day" early in Cassano's tenure and watching him tout various AIG-FP ideas. In one case, Cassano explained how AIG-FP could help banks operate with less capital than regulators typically demanded by essentially insuring their loan portfolios. And the best part was that the deal exposed the company to "no risk." When Cassano spoke, the once-inscrutable company always made perfect sense. Unfortunately, the feeling rarely lasted. "I get back to my desk at the investment house to write up what I learned," the analyst says, "and it's like, 'Tell me again how you take trillions of dollars of notional risk and not actually have any risk?' "

For more on the battle to fix our economy, check out Noam Scheiber's new blog, **THE STASH,** *at www.tnr.com*

Was it a mistake to hand AIG-FP over to someone with such a weak conceptual grasp of the business? Greenberg maintains that there were enough people around Cassano with quantitative backgrounds to set his mind at ease—and that officials at the corporate parent scrutinized AIG-FP transactions exhaustively. (Former employees basically agree with this.)

But, in March 2005, Greenberg resigned from AIG amid allegations of accounting improprieties. Within three weeks, AIG saw its precious triple-A credit rating downgraded. This was a body blow to AIG-FP, which relied on the rating to secure favorable terms for the contracts it signed. Many were so-called credit-default swaps (CDS)—essentially insurance for bonds that investors had purchased. The weaker its credit rating, the more AIG had to pledge in collateral to grease the deals—money it would have to fork over if the bonds suddenly depreciated. In general, the downgrade made AIG-FP less attractive to customers, who relied on the company's credit rating as a guarantee it would pay up if the insurance were needed.

A colleague recalls that Cassano became enraged by the development. He first turned on Greenberg, blaming his former benefactor and casting himself as a victim who'd been let down by the company. Cassano would rant about the cosmic unfairness of it all and refer to Greenberg as a "shithead" who'd always given him a hard time. He began frantically groping for ways to sell outsiders on the idea that, for all the parent company's problems, AIG-FP had produced enormous returns. Though the immaculate credit rating had been the foundation of his business, Cassano would routinely insist that "there are only a few things we do that are dependent on the triple-A rating." "I remember thinking he just desperately wanted to figure out a way to attract business back to himself," says the colleague.

Most of these efforts were for naught. In a conference call about AIG's results from the fourth quarter of 2005, a Wall Street analyst grilled Cassano on why his revenue and profits were down. But there was one type of credit-default-swap customer still keen on doing business with him: the investors then gobbling up bundles of securities backed by subprime real-estate loans. Between March, when Greenberg left AIG, and the end of 2005, Cassano's division issued more than $40 billion in credit-default swaps (essentially insurance) for portfolios of securities backed by subprime mortgages. This was more than half of all the insurance of this type the company had on its books.

Worse, in contrast with the Greenberg era, there was now effectively a vacuum at the top of AIG. Greenberg's successor, Martin Sullivan, was a traditional, meat-and-potatoes insurance man who "didn't have the ability to figure out what was going on there," says another former AIG official. And, even if he'd been able to scrutinize it, Sullivan didn't consider AIG-FP a priority. "He saw his role as going around, meeting every state regulator in the country, and saying, 'We intend to cooperate fully with all investigations of [the] company,' " says this person. For his part, chief financial officer Steve Bensinger found himself completely preoccupied with AIG's accounting statements, whose revision it fell to him to oversee.

The man in charge of keeping an eye on Cassano was a well-respected executive named Bill Dooley. But, former colleagues say, Cassano rebuffed Dooley at every turn, often aggressively. (Greenberg believes Dooley should have appealed to AIG's board if Sullivan didn't support him. Sullivan, Bensinger, Dooley, and Cassano did not respond to requests for comment.) Years of only really answering to Greenberg seem to have convinced Cassano that there was no one else at the company worth listening to.

AIG-FP finally put the brakes on its subprime spree in late 2005. According to the *Post*, some of Cassano's subordinates began to worry that the assets were far, far riskier than AIG-FP had believed and persuaded him to reconsider. At the same time, another AIG division called American General Financial Services, which was actually in the mortgage business, had become alarmed by the subprime market and was balking at approving new subprime loans. One former official says word spread from American General to AIG-FP that the subprime business was a minefield.

Whatever the reason for the decision, Cassano made it extremely grudgingly. It pained him to give up a large source of profits, and, as late as August 2007, he still seemed miffed over the development. "It is hard for us, without being flippant, to even see a scenario within any kind of realm of reason that would see us losing one dollar in any of those transactions," he famously told analysts. Alas, by the following February, the market value of the subprime securities would plummet, and the losses wouldn't be one dollar but … billions. Like that relative said, Cassano should have sold his AIG stock when something happened to Mr. Greenberg. ◆

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Tough Reid

Is the majority leader a partisan or pushover?

EVE FAIRBANKS

Some people keep talismans in their wallets to remind them of those they love: a romantic letter, a set of dog tags, a family picture. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has such a token—but it's to remind him of the people he hates.

When I interviewed the Nevadan in March in his mahogany-toned office off the Senate floor, we cycled through the standard exchanges. Then I asked whether he has a lucky charm. The usually grave Nevada senator smiled, raised his eyebrows, and, fumbling for his wallet in the pocket of a smoothly pressed blue suit, plucked out a ragged-edged, smudged scrap of paper, home-laminated with strips of Scotch tape. "Medicare has no place in a free world," he began to read off the scrap. "Social Security is a rotten trick!"

Reid's lucky charm, it turned out, was a list of brazen quotes uttered by old-school Republican hard-liners. There are riffs from Dick Armey, Bob Dole, and even Newt Gingrich (that Medicare would "wither on the vine" under Republican rule). Reid keeps the scrap private, except when it might deliver a political punch. "He pulled it out on me in a meeting in 2005 about Medicare," recalls one Democratic activist who has seen the keepsake emerge at more than one progressive strategy session. "He'll say, 'I keep this in my wallet to remember who these people are.'" Inside such meetings, the effect can be dramatic. "It's like, wow, Harry Reid's got an axe to grind with Republicans," the activist explains.

Out in the broader world, though, it's just this kind of cocksure vigilantism that's given Reid a miserable reputation. Since taking over for Tom Daschle in 2005, Reid's hyperbolic public outbursts have become a regular feature of the political landscape—like when he called Clarence Thomas an "embarrassment" (on NBC), Alan Greenspan "one of the biggest political hacks we have here in Washington" (on CNN), and George W. Bush a "liar" (at a presser at the Heavenly Ski Resort) and a "loser" (in a Las Vegas high school civics class).

In another man, such pronouncements might sound feisty, but Reid's demeanor dooms him to an irascible, misanthropic image: A slouched former boxer, he often speaks too softly, as if he's sulking and might erupt at any moment; he rarely smiles, and his eyelids are perpetually pink and narrowed to slits. Amazingly, for years he has ranked well below Bush in CNN's favorability ratings poll, and his Nevada numbers aren't much better, provoking titters that a Republican could oust him in 2010. After he touched off a firestorm in 2007 by declaring the Iraq war "lost" in the middle of the Senate's negotiations over war funding, a disgusted David Broder dubbed him the Democrats' own Alberto Gonzales. More recently, Broder's *Washington Post* colleague David Ignatius concluded that Reid is the "pugilistic" epitome of a petty Democratic "Get-Even Gang" on the Hill, and that the party's only hope is for Barack Obama to trample him.

The reviews are so bad it seems almost impossible that Reid has survived as Senate leader. But, though Reid is disliked by the people, his Democratic Senate colleagues adore him. "He's a natural leader," centrist Senator Max Baucus of Montana raved to me last week. Senator Barbara Boxer of California is no less effusive. "I've served under many leaders, and nobody's kept us as close as Harry," she told me. Calling around K Street, I found that former aides to Democratic senators remembered Reid the same way: as "brilliant," "deliberate," "communicative," and "the ultimate patient listener" with "a gentle sense of humor." A gentle sense of humor? Were we talking about the same Harry Reid?

This split reputation is the strange mystery of Harry Reid. The secret of his success in the Senate is that he is not remotely the same man there as he is in public. As the Democratic Party becomes more and more peppered with mavericks, centrists, and defectors, Reid—the guy who plays the hyper-partisan moralist crusader on television—turns the other cheek on the Hill. To co-opt the disloyal, he not only tolerates them: He rewards them.

The simplest part of Reid's strategy in the Senate is to excel at pure gentility. Anyone who helps the group is publicly congratulated or thanked. Democratic gatherings, like the weekly Senate caucus luncheons, proceed "like a synagogue meeting, where everyone's like, 'Thank you for donating the Kiddush,'" explains one former top Senate aide. Even when Reid can't deliver a senator his heart's desire (as when Wisconsin's Russ Feingold wanted the Senate Democrats to insist on pulling American troops out of Iraq), Reid looks for a way to respect the wish: Feingold's end-the-war amendments always lost, but they always got a vote. Reid also seems to find something to interest him in every senator. Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson, a hunter, relates his chats with Reid: "He asks me how my family is, and we talk about what's going on—and he wants to know what I've shot lately." Baucus marvels, "On occasion he'll just call up as a friend to say 'Hi, how are things going,' rather than call and ask me to do something. … I've never gotten a call like that from another senator. … Just a few days ago, we talked about Cormac McCarthy and the book he wrote, *The Road*, and how much we both love that book."

Reid isn't only being a nice guy. He uses this gentility to woo wayward Democrats back to the party line. This was Reid's biggest challenge during the Bush years, and no one was the object of his sweet-talking ways more than Max Baucus, Montana's maverick cowboy senator who has made a career out of going rogue on his fellow Democrats. In 2001, Baucus teamed up with Iowa Republican Chuck Grassley—one of his best friends in the Senate and his counterpart on the powerful Finance Committee—to hand Bush his massive tax-cut plan essentially untouched; in 2003, he joined a negotiating session on Medicare as a scab after Republicans locked the Democratic leadership out of the room. Daschle reportedly was apoplectic. But, when Reid took over as minority leader, in 2005, he tapped Baucus, of all people, to face down Bush's effort to privatize Social Security. "He just said, 'Max, I want you to take the lead in fighting this nutty privatization idea,'" Baucus remembers, his voice full of pleasure. "It was music to my ears, because I wanted to take the lead! … I relished the charge."

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The choice had seemed crazy. But Baucus threw himself into the effort, and his campaigning helped keep other Democratic moderates on the wagon. Even Republicans ended up fleeing the president's plan. It was the Democrats' biggest policy triumph since Bush took office. When asked whether Reid's charge was an empowering moment, Baucus crows, "That's an understatement. I loved it! President Bush flew out to Great Falls, Montana, touting his plan. I think," he snickers conspiratorially, "he went to Montana because of me."

Reid has been known even to encourage moderates' dalliances privately while playing the partisan for the cameras. At a Senate Democratic luncheon after this year's $787-billion economic stimulus package passed Congress, Reid took a few minutes to acknowledge Ben Nelson's contributions—despite the fact that, by negotiating with Republicans to strip $100 billion from the original plan, Nelson had done more to undermine the Democratic version of the stimulus than to support it. It turned out, however, that Reid himself had encouraged Nelson. "Publicly, he gets out there saying the moderates are screwing up the process," says a Nelson friend. "But, behind the scenes, he's encouraging us—'Get a deal, get a deal, get a deal.'" It's a perfect play: Nelson "gets to go up there and be the maverick, but he's actually working with Reid," the friend explains.

Perhaps the apogee of Reid's practice of forgiveness was his handling of Joe Lieberman. Although he claimed that Lieberman's behavior after he endorsed John McCain made him furious—"I defy anyone to be more angry than I was," he told reporters—in practice, he was nothing if not kind. When Lieberman called him up in July to say that he would be speaking at the GOP convention, Reid didn't chew him out but simply explained why he wouldn't vote for McCain. And when, after McCain lost, Lieberman wanted to retain not only his place within the Democratic caucus but his Committee on Homeland Security chairmanship, Reid lined up a group of character witnesses, including freshman senators Jeff Merkley and Tom Udall, to defend him in front of other Democratic senators. "He was infatuated with John McCain, and he did some things he regrets," Reid tells me with a shrug. From Reid's point of view, this generosity was simply a practical move: Lieberman was necessary to woo Republican Susan Collins; without him, "we never would have passed the economic recovery package."

Among Democratic senators, Reid's gentility seems to promote intense goodwill. After Broder published his broadside comparing Reid to Gonzales in the *Post*, Chuck Schumer became so agitated he decided to gin up a petition of senators in protest. "There almost was a line on the floor of the Senate," Schumer recalls. "I got everybody's signatures within a few hours. Even Lieberman's."

Reid's gamble is that yielding to his members in the short term will bring not only personal loyalty but political benefit as well, that a sort of Swiss Family Robinson spirit will develop within the caucus. And there's some evidence of success: After Democrats had suffered defeat after humiliating defeat trying to get a piece of Iraq legislation past the caucus's own moderates and the Republicans up to President Bush for a veto showdown, Reid asked Nelson—the epitome of an Iraq centrist—to do him a crucial favor and vote for a 2007 emergency war-funding bill that included a troop withdrawal timetable, ensuring its inclusion in the final version that went to the president. "Senator Reid was able to talk to Senator Nelson and explain to him how we needed to have this debate [with Bush]," says a leadership aide.

It seems Reid's courtship also has loosened Baucus's unbending loyalty to Grassley, long an obstacle to forcing liberal legislation through the Finance Committee. When the State Children's Health Insurance Program came up for renewal in January, for instance, Baucus did Reid's bidding in extending the benefits to legal immigrants despite Grassley's wild opposition. And, just this summer, Baucus blew off Grassley's overtures on a plan to subsidize doctors' Medicare payments. At a press conference after the bill passed, Reid praised Baucus for being a big boy. "He stood tall, and I am so proud of the chairman of our Finance Committee," said Reid.

This latitude, of course, has its risks. In December 2007, the Democratic plan to roll back oil and gas subsidies came up one vote short due to the defection of Louisiana Democrat Mary Landrieu. "Insiders say that even behind closed doors, Reid does not demand that Landrieu fall in line with the party's energy agenda," *Congressional Quarterly* reported. And, last January, when Democrats were negotiating a stimulus bill with President Bush, Reid handed Baucus the task of writing his own package on behalf of the Senate; the resulting plan blithely handed tax rebates to the fabulously rich, at Grassley's request. The Democratic caucus publicly recoiled, giving a damaging impression of intra-party confusion. "[It] causes me to want to gag, okay?" Reid himself barked to reporters. (But Baucus's perfidy didn't seem to hurt the Reid-Baucus relationship a bit. "He has the patience of Job," Baucus rhapsodizes.)

Since Obama took office, though, some of the conditions that allowed Reid to court moderate Democrats have vanished. He's not leading his troops in an easy offense against a weakened Bush, putting up bills fated for veto and intended as political gamesmanship. Today, senators who sign on to the Democrats' ambitious proposals—projects like health care reform or cap and trade—will be held responsible back home. Already, some centrists are balking. Blanche Lincoln, Mark Pryor, and Landrieu have all backed off their former support for the Employee Free Choice Act, forcing Reid to dump an idea to bring it to the Senate floor.

The bigger shortcoming of Reid's gentlemanly approach is that Republicans remain impervious to his charms. That doesn't mean Reid hasn't tried. Starting this term, Reid changed his approach to the procedural rules he uses to allow the GOP to offer amendments to Democratic bills. He has also, of course, let the GOP force essentially every serious bill to cross the 60-vote filibuster bar. Nate Silver, *FiveThirtyEight.com*'s political statistician, has calculated that the Senate voted on 112 cloture motions in the 110th, Reid's first term as majority leader, twice the number in the previous Congress and more than double the average number over the previous 20 years.

The day I met Reid in his office, he was struggling to round up 60 votes on the omnibus budget bill, which he'd earlier vowed he'd bring to a vote that night. In the middle of a chat about poetry in front of his crackling fireplace—"Who's your favorite poet?" he'd asked me eagerly after I mentioned a poem he loves by Emily Dickinson, "There Is No Frigate Like a Book"—an aide's hand thrust a yellow Post-It note through the heavy door, and Reid rose mid-sentence to call a wavering senator. "Any luck?" I asked, when he came back in. "No luck," he replied, almost chipperly. Reid didn't seem angry or worried: He and his fellow Democrats expected that moderate Republicans could ultimately be swayed, perhaps by Reid's generosity in allowing the GOP to offer copious amendments. ("Harry's been eminently fair," another senator whispered to me confidently that day.) But they weren't moved. By that night, the magic 60 hadn't materialized, and Reid sent his senators home for the weekend empty-handed. ◆

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Why the Democrats Can't Govern

Look who's killing Obama's agenda now.

JONATHAN CHAIT

The last Democrat who held the White House, Bill Clinton, saw the core of his domestic agenda come to ruin, his political support collapse, and his failure spawn a massive Republican resurgence that made progressive reform impossible for a decade to come. The Democrat who last held the White House before that, Jimmy Carter, saw the exact same thing happen to him.

At this early date, nobody can know whether or not Barack Obama will escape this fate. But the contours of failure are now clearly visible. In Obama's case, as with his predecessors, the prospective culprit is the same: Democrats in Congress, and especially the Senate. At a time when the country desperately needs a coherent response to the array of challenges it faces, the congressional arm of the Democratic Party remains mired in fecklessness, parochialism, and privilege. Obama has made mistakes, as did his predecessors. Yet the constant recurrence of legislative squabbling and drift suggests a deeper problem than any characterological or tactical failures by these presidents: a congressional party that is congenitally unable to govern.

George W. Bush came to office having lost the popular vote, with only 50 Republicans in the Senate. After his disputed election, pundits insisted Bush would have to scale back his proposed massive tax cuts for the rich. Instead, Bush managed to enact several rounds of tax cuts that substantially exceeded those in his campaign platform, along with two war resolutions, a Medicare prescription drug benefit designed to maximize profits for the health care industry, energy legislation, education reform, and sundry other items. Whatever the substantive merits of this agenda, its passage represented an impressive feat of political leverage, accomplished through near-total partisan discipline.

Obama has come into office having won the popular vote by seven percentage points, along with a 79-seat edge in the House, a 17-seat edge in the Senate, and massive public demand for change. But it's already clear he is receiving less, not more, deference from his own party. Democrats have treated Obama with studied diffidence, both in their support for the substance of his agenda and (more importantly) their willingness to support it procedurally.

The tone of the Senate's disposition toward Obama was set from the very beginning. Coming into office during a severe economic emergency, he hoped that Congress would have a bill to jump-start consumer demand ready to sign immediately upon taking office. And most Democrats supported Obama's position, though eleven House moderates defected, while a handful of their Senate colleagues joined with Republican moderates to water down the legislation. Economic forecasters projected that the original House bill would increase employment by 3.5 million. After the Senate rewrote the bill, forecasters downgraded their estimate to just 2.5 million. Moderates regarded their contribution with deep satisfaction.

The stimulus served as a mere precursor to the major battle over Obama's budget, which represents a once-in-a-generation chance for the Democratic Party to reshape the priorities of the federal government—to reduce America's unsustainable carbon emissions and reform its bloated, cruel health care system. Democrats have utterly failed to rise to the occasion.

The first sign of how the Senate would respond came on February 27, when Kent Conrad, the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, gave an interview to CNBC. Conrad listed three objections to Obama's budget. First, he opposed a provision to limit tax deductions for high-income earners. Second, he opposed a new cap on crop subsidies to farmers who take in more than $500,000 per year. And, third, he upbraided Obama for not doing more to reduce the budget deficit.

You might think a performance like this—demanding that Obama do more to reduce the deficit while simultaneously opposing his deficit-reducing measures—would have turned Conrad into a punch line. Instead, it launched him as a symbol of fiscal rectitude and encouraged fellow Democrats to follow in his hypocritical wake. Numerous Democrats have since stepped forward to join what news reports have accurately described as a "revolt" against Obama's budget.

What's maddening is not that Obama's budget is a perfect document—though it does a better job of setting priorities than any presidential budget in at least the last 30 years—but that the deficit-reducing measures Democrats object to are the most sensible parts of the budget.

Take the farm payments Conrad endorses. It is virtually impossible to find an economist on the left, right, or center who defends agriculture subsidies, which are costly, distort the market, and hurt the Third World poor. Obama does not dare phase out crop subsidies. Instead, he modestly asks to save about $1 billion per year by eliminating payments to farmers who gross more than $500,000 per year—the least justifiable slice of a totally unjustifiable program. Conrad the Deficit Hawk, joined by other farm-state senators (such as Nebraska's Ben Nelson) and representatives, cannot abide it.

Or consider Obama's plan to limit tax deductions for the rich. If your goal is to raise revenue without imposing pain on the middle class or unduly harming incentives, this is about the best way one can do it. (Because limiting deductions would not raise marginal tax rates, objections from conservative economists have been generally muted.) Democrats in both chambers have declared this proposal dead on arrival. But, if they want to reduce the deficit and fund health care reform, the money needs to come from somewhere.

The most emblematic objection has come from Nelson, who is balking at Obama's plan to save money on college loans. You might suppose that a fiscal conservative like Nelson would agree with Obama's plan to save $4 billion on a social program. But he does not, for reasons that provide a useful window into the rot afflicting the congressional Democratic Party.

For many years, the federal government supported college education by guaranteeing bank loans to students. If a student defaulted on his loan, Washington would simply pay back the difference. In 1993, Clinton undertook to reform the program

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by cutting out the middlemen and simply having the federal government issue the loans directly. Clinton hoped to save money for the government and plow some of those savings into lower interest rates for students. Of course, private lenders who benefitted from the no-risk profit stream balked and forced a compromise whereby both kinds of loans—guaranteed private loans, and direct loans from the government—would exist side by side.

Recent years have shown beyond a doubt that the direct lending program works better. Every independent analysis—by the Congressional Budget Office, by the Office of Management and Budget under each of the last three presidents, and by the New America Foundation—has found that direct lending is cheaper. The guaranteed-loan program managed to cling to life through its congressional patrons and through simple graft. In 2007, a major student-loan scandal emerged when it turned out that private lenders paid off college administrators to drop out of the direct lending program and steer students to them.

Obama thus proposes to save the taxpayers more than $4 billion per year by ending the guaranteed loans. This is as straightforward a case as you can find of a fight between special interests and the public good. Nelson opposes it because one of the lenders that benefits from federal overpayments is based in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Some moderate Democrats seem to suffer from a conflation of their own fund-raising strategies with responsible fiscal policy. *The Wall Street Journal* reported, of a group of Democratic Senate centrists, "Their stated goal is to rein in deficits and to protect business interests." In fact, this is not a goal but two often-conflicting goals, and neither is synonymous with "the national interest." This sort of behavior didn't hurt Bush because his agenda largely *was* synonymous with business interests. But the Democratic agenda isn't, and Democratic confusion of the two is poisonous.

A second and related problem is that Democrats are especially susceptible to the dysfunction of the Senate. Congressional scholar Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute penned an article in AEI's magazine titled "Our Broken Senate." Over the last three decades, the filibuster, once a rare weapon used to express unusually strong objections, has dramatically expanded and turned into a routine, 60-vote supermajority requirement. During the same time period, the Senate has developed a new, anonymous one-person filibuster called a "hold." The clubby traditions of the Senate have allowed these new practices to expand unchallenged. "The always individual-oriented Senate," writes Ornstein, "has become even more indulgent of the demands of each of its 100 egotists."

The Senate poses a particular obstacle to Democrats. Its structure gives greater voice to residents of low-population states, who tilt more Republican than the country as a whole. If you assume that every senator represents half the population of that state, then the Republican caucus represents less than 38 percent of the public. In electoral terms, we think of that as a tiny, even fringe minority. It's less than the share of the electorate that voted for Barry Goldwater in 1964. But it supports enough senators to block the majority's will.

There is one tool available to break through the new supermajority requirement. That tool is called "reconciliation." Reconciliation is an expedited process to vote on a budget, limiting debate to 20 hours and, more importantly, circumventing the filibuster. This means that one budget bill every year can be passed with just 51 votes. As the filibuster has grown routine, reconciliation has become a vital legislative tool. Many Democrats, alas, are far more squeamish than their GOP colleagues about deploying this tool.

If you do not follow Senate arcana for a living, you have probably never heard of reconciliation until the last few weeks, when it has suddenly emerged into the public debate as a terrible weapon with fearsome consequences. A recent front-page *Washington Post* article described reconciliation as a "shortcut." Republican Senator Judd Gregg cast the tactic in the most dramatic terms. "You're talking about running over the minority, putting them in cement and throwing them in the Chicago River," he wailed.

The notion that reconciliation represents some radical and extreme partisan step has settled in so deeply in part because numerous Democrats are making the same case, albeit in slightly less hysterical terms. Eight Democratic senators signed a letter opposing the use of reconciliation to pass a cap-and-trade bill limiting carbon-dioxide emissions. Reconciliation, they wrote, "would circumvent normal Senate practice and would be inconsistent with the administration's stated goals of bipartisanship, cooperation, and openness." Several Democrats also oppose using reconciliation to pass health care reform. Democrat Mary Landrieu offered up a somewhat less melodramatic argument when she said that reconciliation "was intended for deficit reduction, and it should not be used for other things."

Reconciliation may have been *intended* for deficit reduction, but it has been often used for other things, such as deficit expansion—as in the case of the Bush tax cuts, which Landrieu voted for. (As did Gregg, who, as my colleague Jonathan Cohn discovered, was happy to support reconciliation for proposals like drilling for oil in ANWR when Republicans controlled the majority.)

Ben Nelson: principled, public-minded centrist.

SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

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There is, to be sure, a technical case to be made against the use of reconciliation. It's a more limited procedure that allows for less debate and may constrict the scope of the legislation that can be passed. I'd argue, in response, that the technical compromises required to get through reconciliation would degrade the legislation less than the political compromises required to get 60 votes. But the heart of the case against reconciliation isn't technical, it's moral—reconciliation as an unprecedented act of partisan irresponsibility. Robert Byrd calls the process "an undemocratic disservice to our people and to the Senate's institutional role."

To grasp how upside-down this view is, remember the purpose of the reconciliation process, which is to clear the way for the Senate to make politically painful solutions to long-term problems. Health care and climate change clearly fall into that category. Shoveling hundreds of billions of dollars of upper-class tax cuts out the door, by contrast, is the very opposite of what reconciliation is intended for. And yet, Bush's repeated use of reconciliation to enact his tax cuts attracted no controversy at all.

Even at this early date, the contrast between Democrats under Obama and Republicans under Bush is stark. Republicans did not denounce Bush for squandering a budget surplus to benefit the rich, the way Democrats now assail Obama for big spending and deficits. And Republicans did not refuse to use the budget procedures available to them to break through the Senate's inherent lethargy. Republicans, in other words, acted like a parliamentary party.

Voters in 2000 did not go to the polls with the intention of giving the GOP a chance to put its agenda into place. But Republicans acted as if they did. With very few exceptions, Republicans in Congress behaved like the legislative branch of the Bush administration, helping Bush enact his agenda by using every method at their disposal.

Democratic partisans constantly complain that their leaders in Washington fail to display the same partisan unity as Republicans do. And, in many crucial respects, they are correct. Even when they control the White House and both branches of Congress, Democrats have not displayed the parliamentary-style cohesion Republicans managed under Bush.

One reason is that Democrats are trapped by their past. America's two major parties have, historically, lacked much ideological cohesion. The GOP contained conservatives alongside progressives. The Democratic Party consisted of everything from Northern liberals to Southern reactionaries. The latter, in particular, held disproportionate sway in Congress. Having less in common with Democratic presidents than Republican ones, they carved out an independent role and guarded their prerogatives.

Since Democrats controlled the Congress almost continuously for more than 60 years beginning in 1933, the culture of Congress left a deeper imprint on their party. Republicans, shut out from the perks of majority status, finally decided under the opposition leadership of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s that their only path to power lay in partisan discipline.

Democrats, on the other hand, came of age under the old Democratic chieftains, and they have mostly aped that style. They do not fall in line, even under a Democratic president who mostly shares their goals. Shortly after Obama took office, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced, "I don't work for him." Even House Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel, whose Harlem constituents danced in the streets after Obama's election, sniffed of Obama's plan to raise taxes on the rich, "I have to study it but I really don't take presidents' recommendations that seriously." *Recommendation*—that is the term that summarizes Congress's attitude. A president can suggest whatever he likes, but Congress is the one making the decisions, and don't you forget it.

A second factor encouraging Democrats to buck their presidents is the role of the rich and business interests. Unless you are a high school student reading this article in your civics course, in which case I'm sorry to dispel your illusions, you will not be stunned to learn that the affluent carry disproportionate political weight with elites in both parties. So, while people who earn more than $250,000 per year make up just a tiny slice of the electorate, they make up a huge chunk of any congressman's friends, acquaintances, and fund-raisers.

What's more, whatever their disposition toward business in general, Democrats feel it is not just a right but a duty to slavishly attend to the interests of their home-state businesses. That is why Kent Conrad upholds even the most absurd demands of agribusiness, or why even a good-government progressive like Michigan's Carl Levin parrots the auto industry's line on regulating carbon dioxide.

Taken as a whole, then, the influence of business and the rich unites Republicans and splits Democrats. A few Republicans no doubt felt some qualms about supporting Bush's regressive, extreme pro-business agenda, but their most influential donors and constituents pushed them in the direction of partisan unity. Those same forces encourage Democrats to defect. That's why Ben Nelson is fighting student-loan reform, coal- and oil-state Democrats are insisting that cap-and-trade legislation be subject to a filibuster, and Democrats everywhere are fretting about reducing tax deductions for the highest-earning 1 percent of the population.

And then, finally, Democrats have locked themselves into a self-fulfilling prophecy. When their party controls all of Washington, things tend to go south quickly. The president's popularity plunges, and soon his co-partisans in Congress find themselves scrambling to keep from losing their own seats in the political undertow. It happened to Carter in 1978 and 1980, and again to Clinton in 1994.

And, so, they hedge their bets by carving out an independent identity. It doesn't matter that Obama is popular now, or that a majority of Americans (according to a recent Pew poll) reject the criticism that he's "trying to do too much." If Obama defies history and retains his popularity, they'll retain their seats anyway. They have to worry about the scenario where Obama turns into an albatross.

But, of course, the more Democrats defect, the more the president is defined as an extreme liberal, and the more ineffectual he seems as his agenda crashes upon the shoals. Ultimately, the moderates find there is no escape. Republicans in Congress grasped the futility of beggar-thy-neighbor survivalism, and they stood behind Bush in 2005 and 2006, even as his popularity fell to Nixonian levels. The hard truth for Democrats is that Obama's popularity *is* bound to fall. The economy will not turn around overnight, and the voters' memory of disastrous GOP rule will grow dimmer and dimmer with time. The one factor within the Democrats' control is whether their constituents see Obama as a strong leader taking action, like Roosevelt or Kennedy, or a floundering weakling, like Carter or first-term Clinton.

It seems impossible to believe that this party, with the challenges before the country so great and the opportunity to address them so rare, would once again follow the path to self-immolation. Yet, somehow, the Democrats can't help themselves. ◆

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Empty Garden

Why did New York stop growing basketball stars?

JASON ZENGERLE

On the basketball courts of New York City, there may be no truer measure of a player's stature than his nickname. If a player is considered good, then his moniker will be something straightforward: "Pee Wee" if he is short; "Lefty" if he shoots with that hand. But if a player is viewed as great, then his talent can actually inspire poetry. He will be called "Half-Man Half-Amazing" for his superhuman dunks or "Skip to My Lou" for the way he hopscotches down the court as he dribbles past hapless opponents. "In New York," says Bobbito Garcia, the editor of the basketball magazine *Bounce* and the unofficial etymologist of the city's basketball culture, "you don't get a nickname unless you earn it."

It's a testament, then, to the considerable basketball talent of Lance Stephenson, an 18-year-old high school senior who lives in Coney Island, that he has already been graced with several quality nicknames, ranging from the punning ("Sir Lance-A-Lot") to the messianic ("The One"). But the nickname for Stephenson that is most inspired, and the one that seemingly everyone agrees fits him best—including Stephenson himself, who has it tattooed on his right bicep—is "Born Ready."

He earned the name on a humid summer night in 2006, during a game at Rucker Park in Harlem. Considered the Mecca of New York's playground courts, the Rucker has long been a proving ground for the city's best basketball players. Everyone from NBA stars (like Manhattan's Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Brooklyn's Connie Hawkins, and Queens's Kenny Anderson) to esteemed streetballers (whose reputations typically never extended beyond the five boroughs) has run up and down its green-painted asphalt. Even heralded NBA players who aren't from New York have come to the Rucker over the years to burnish their legends. Stephenson first played at Rucker Park in 2003, when he was just twelve years old, in a game that featured local youth stars. After the youth game, the adults—many of them Division I college players—took the court, but they were a player short, so they approached one of Stephenson's teammates. "I was sitting next to Corey Fisher, and they asked him to play," Stephenson recently recalled for me, as he sat in the living room of his family's cramped Coney Island rowhouse. "And then he was like, 'No, no.' I think he was scared. And then they asked me, and I was like, 'What? He said no?' I'm like, all right, I'm playing. And they just took me out of the crowd, and I just started playing."

It would be the first of many occasions during which Stephenson was a boy among men on the city's playground courts, as he routinely began to compete (and often excel) in games that were composed of not just college players but pros, too. By the time Stephenson came to the Rucker that night in 2006—as the only rising sophomore in an all-star game showcasing the nation's top 24 high school players—his reputation was well-established. But it was only after he had executed a particularly impressive driving layup that Garcia, who was serving as the game's M.C., felt sufficiently moved to christen him over the courtside P.A. system. "I'd seen him go up against seasoned NBA veterans, seasoned college cats, high school kids two or three years older than him, and he was always reppin'," Garcia says, "so I just called it. He's Born Ready."

In the two-and-a-half years since his anointment, Stephenson's stature in New York City basketball circles has only grown. He's continued to shine on the playgrounds, and, more importantly, he has dominated the city's high school game. With one Public School Athletic League (PSAL) championship to his credit before he was dubbed Born Ready—having led his Abraham Lincoln High School Railsplitters to the city title as a mere freshman—Stephenson repeated the feat in his sophomore and junior years, earning two New York *Daily News* "Player of the Year" honors in the process. Going into his senior year of high school, Born Ready, who has grown to an imposing 6'5" and 205 pounds, was on the brink of breaking New York State's all-time scoring record of 2,785 points—held by a previous Lincoln player, Sebastian Telfair. He also stood poised to do something that none of the great New York City high school basketball players who came before him had ever done—not Connie Hawkins, not Kenny Anderson, not even Kareem: collect four city titles.

"If he wins a fourth straight city championship," Tom Konchalski, a Queens-based basketball scout who's been watching New York City players for 51 years, told me, "he'll elevate himself to iconic status."

Ever since basketball first entered the national consciousness, the sport's New York City icons have become American ones. Yes, basketball may have been invented in 1891 in Springfield, Massachusetts—by a Canadian, no less—but the game was largely developed, and then perfected, by people who played it in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Like abstract expressionism and the Beats, basketball was one of New York's cultural gifts to the rest of the country—and, in many ways, a perfect expression of the individualism and grit that characterized the Big Apple itself. "[T]he most active, dedicated basketball city of all," as the late Pete Axthelm described it in his classic 1970 book *The City Game*, New York has long been the sport's spiritual home. During the first half of the twentieth century, Irish and Jewish ballplayers learned the game on the city's settlement house courts and in its CYO gyms. From there, men like Nat Holman and Joe Lapchick spread the plays they helped develop—the give-and-go, the back-door cut, the pick-and-roll—across the country, first as members of a barnstorming pro team called the Original Celtics and later as coaches at the City College of New York and St. John's University. Then, in the late 1950s, after New York's white ethnics passed the torch to the city's African American players, it was black New Yorkers who, on courts in the city's housing projects, put the imprimatur of their own aesthetic on basketball. As Nelson George wrote of Rucker Park in his 1992 book, *Elevating the Game*, "Years before Jordan, Dr. J, or 'hang time' entered basketball's lexicon, the Rucker was, at least among its best, a place where the game belonged above the rim."

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Of course, New York didn't just export its style of play to the rest of the country; it exported its players, too. Whether it was the "underground railroad," which took New York's Catholics and Jews to play for fellow New Yorker Frank McGuire when he coached at the University of North Carolina in the 1950s, or, later, the "ghetto express," which delivered African Americans from Bed-Stuy and the Bronx to four-year universities all over the country, New York was always the hub of amateur basketball's elaborate transit system. Meanwhile, NBA clubs—to say nothing of NBA all-star games—were stocked with men who'd learned and honed their games in the five boroughs. During one remarkable eleven-year stretch in the 1970s and '80s, a New York–born basketball player won the NBA's MVP award seven times. The reflected glory from all this shined down on the city's high school players: Success in New York was viewed as the greatest predictor of success elsewhere. "People looked at New York City and said, 'If he's the best player in New York City,'" Dick Weiss, the New York *Daily News*'s basketball writer, explains, "'he must be the best player in the country.'"

But, recently, that equation has proven to be a false one. In the past 15 years, the high school players who were hailed as the city's finest—who, as mere schoolboys, graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*—have foundered at the college level or have made it to the NBA just long enough for a cup of coffee. Once mentioned in the same breath as Abdul-Jabbar and Hawkins, today names like Felipe Lopez and Lenny Cooke are mentioned as some of the game's biggest busts, if they are spoken of at all. Meanwhile, other New Yorkers who did go on to long careers in the NBA—Stephon Marbury, hailed as the city's greatest point guard ever when he graduated from Lincoln in 1995; Ron Artest, who grew up in Queens and played his college basketball at St. John's—are today known mainly as malcontents and underachievers. Worst of all, New York has ceded its star-making power to places like Philadelphia (Kobe Bryant), Chicago (Dwyane Wade), and Baltimore (Carmelo Anthony). "How many first-team [college] All-Americans is New York City going to have this year?" asks Dick Weiss. "I'll tell you: None. How many New York kids are playing in the NBA all-star game? None. Our city is not producing the great player in the numbers that it used to, and it's not producing the great star the way it used to."

All of this has been felt most acutely by Lance Stephenson. At the same time that his stature in New York City has been growing, his national reputation has plummeted. Once the consensus number-one overall player in the 2009 high school class, he has seen his ranking slip in the last few years—to number two, then four, and recently as low as nine, according to various scouting services. Some talent evaluators believe he has put on too much muscle and lost his quickness; others fret that he has yet to develop a consistent enough jump shot or the requisite defensive footwork to succeed at the next level.

The most pressing concerns involve his mental approach to the game—and to life. During his junior year at Lincoln, Stephenson was suspended from school for five days after fighting with a teammate. At the beginning of his senior year, he was charged with groping a 17-year-old girl on school grounds. (The case is pending.) Last summer, Stephenson suffered the ignominy of being cut from the USA National Under-18 team. "I was at those trials for two days, and I can tell you that from a pure basketball standpoint, there's no reason Lance should have been cut," says *Sports Illustrated* basketball writer Seth Davis. "Lance's problem was that he's a great physical specimen, but he was acting like a lousy teammate." Stephenson's troubles have been so great that, at the outset of his senior season, it was believed he was being heavily recruited by only a handful of colleges. "I think a lot of schools have concluded he's not worth the headaches," a coach at one Division I program told me.

And so Stephenson faces a double set of pressures: Not only is he expected to use his basketball talents to lift his family out of the grinding poverty of Coney Island; he's being counted on to avoid the pitfalls that have recently tripped up so many of the city's other stars and to reestablish New York's reputation as the most active, dedicated basketball city of all. "Everybody in New York is looking for the next savior," says Weiss. "And, right now, everybody is looking at Lance."

On a Thursday night in early February, Stephenson took the court at Lincoln for a game against Boys & Girls High School. Located a few blocks from the beach in Coney Island, Lincoln was once considered to be among the best academic high schools not just in Brooklyn but in all of New York, graduating students like Joseph Heller and Arthur Miller. Today, it's most renowned for its basketball team and for producing stars like Marbury and Telfair. In recent years, the Railsplitters have been the subject of two books and two documentaries; in Spike Lee's feature film *He Got Game*, about a fictional Brooklyn hoops phenom named Jesus Shuttlesworth, Jesus plays for Lincoln. And yet, despite this renown, Lincoln is still an inner-city New York public high school—meaning that its gym is a decrepit cage, which, during some games, is ringed by a dozen or so school security guards and police officers; its basketball locker room is a classroom; and, until recently, its team traveled to away games by subway. Although, in the popular imagination, the classic underdog high school basketball team is a bunch of white farm boys from Indiana who win the state championship, it's hard not to view Lincoln's record of success as a greater triumph over seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

As the teams warmed up before the game began, Stephenson did some desultory stretching and hoisted a few flat-footed shots. With his chiseled frame and fierce eyes, he possessed a quiet but obvious charisma. Still, his teammates seemed not so much inspired by as wary of him, and they gave him a wide berth. It had been a trying season thus far. Playing an ambitious schedule that included matchups against high school powers from Texas, Alabama, and California, the Railsplitters had already lost eight games—four more than they had in the entire previous season. Stephenson's personal performance had suffered, too. Although he was still scoring gobs of points, he wasn't scoring them in the emphatic manner to which he was accustomed. Rather than rim-rattling dunks and assertive drives to the basket, he was getting his points off pull-up jumpers and put-backs. "I haven't seen Lance play *his* game once this year," his father, Lance Stephenson Sr., complained. "If he even makes a move to the basket, the refs call him for a foul. Everyone just be flopping. It makes him so tentative, he's afraid to play his game."

In the moments before the opening tip, however, whatever tentativeness had been plaguing Stephenson seemed to evaporate. His posture went from slumped to coiled, as he paced around the center court circle, glaring at the Boys & Girls players. And, although Boys & Girls won the opening tap, it took Stephenson all of ten seconds to steal the ball from one of his opponents and race down the court for a ferocious tomahawk dunk. As the ball bounced on the floor around his ankles, he flexed his arms and let out a scream that echoed off the gym's faded-brick walls. Those would be the first two of his 29 points in the game—

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many of which were tallied in a similarly resounding fashion. When the final buzzer sounded, Lincoln had prevailed 64 to 54. Stephenson was surrounded on the court by a gaggle of reporters. "We ain't no losing team," he said, sweat still dripping from his face. "I feel very confident for the city championship."

Stephenson was accustomed to making these sorts of pronouncements to the press. Although basketball no longer occupies a central place in the life of the city, New York's high school players retain enough of their old mystique to be the focus of intense media scrutiny—especially from the growing number of magazines and websites dedicated to chronicling schoolboy basketball stars. Indeed, the most popular theory among hoops cognoscenti for why so many New York City high school phenoms have been flaming out in college or the pros is that they were never that good to begin with. "They create them to be these mythical figures when they're in high school and then, when they get to college or the pros, some of them turn out to be just ordinary players," says Sonny Vaccaro, the former sneaker impresario who for years hosted summer camps and tournaments for America's top high school players. "A lot of times, they're just overhyped."

But the hype can do more than artificially inflate a player's reputation. It can also cause him to overestimate his own abilities and fail to work on improving them. "I now see kids who I consider mid- and low-Division I prospects walking around with posses," says Gary Charles, the director of an AAU (i.e. non-school) team called the New York Panthers. "A kid's not going to listen to a coach telling him he's got to get better if everyone else is telling him he's already great." It's become so bad that, in recent years, an increasing number of elite New York players have been leaving the city—either to go to faraway prep schools or Catholic schools in northern New Jersey. "Even though they're right across the river, I don't think the kids in Jersey are playing with the same media attention and the same pressures that come in New York," says Kimani Young, who is on the basketball staff at St. John's University and was a star at Queens's Forest Hills High School in the early 1990s.

Most damaging of all, the media glare can magnify a New York player's struggles. While high school stars in other cities are generally free to make mistakes out of the public eye, in New York nothing is private. Stephenson, who for a time allowed a video crew to trail him for an online reality show about his life called "Born Ready," has learned that the hard way. Last October, after he was charged in the groping incident, he found a photographer from the *Daily News* waiting outside his house—leading to a picture of him in the paper strolling to his car, as if he were doing a perp walk.

The day after the victory over Boys & Girls, I went back to Lincoln to attend the Railsplitters' practice. Stephenson's father had told me to meet him and his wife, Bernadette, there so that we could talk more about their son. This didn't sit well with Lincoln's coach, Dwayne "Tiny" Morton, who evidently hadn't wanted any visitors at the session, but he grudgingly acceded to my presence. As I would learn, the relationship between the coach and his star player's family was a fraught one. Morton, who played point guard at Lincoln in the mid-'80s and has been the school's coach since 1995, was accustomed to managing the process through which his star players went on to the next stage of their basketball careers. In 2004, he helped Telfair chart a course directly from Lincoln to the NBA and a multimillion-dollar shoe contract with Adidas. But because Morton often seemed to do well for himself along the way—not long before Telfair signed with Adidas, the shoe company made Morton a consultant and reportedly agreed to a lucrative deal with his AAU team—the Stephensons, according to those familiar with the situation, feared he wouldn't put their son's best interests first, so they'd frozen him out of Lance's college decision-making process. "Tiny would like to have a lot of say in it," says one recruiting analyst, "but he's not going to have any say in it. It's pretty much just Lance's family."

Lance Sr. and Bernadette sat in a couple of school-desk chairs in a corner of the gym, while Lance did some shooting drills with his teammates; their other child, a two-year-old boy named Lantz, darted on and off the court, retrieving loose balls.

How old was Lance when he started playing basketball? I asked.

"He came out playing," Lance Sr. replied, giving new meaning to his son's nickname. "I mean, I can't even remember when he couldn't play. He always knew how to dribble. He picked it up, just like him"—he pointed at Lantz, who was right then dribbling a ball and displaying a shockingly good handle for a toddler—"at an early age."

Lance Sr., who works on and off as a heating plant technician, played basketball for Brooklyn's Lafayette High School in the mid-'80s. "We were like the third place team," he said. He'd wanted to play on the perimeter, but his 6'5" frame—which earned him the moniker "Stretch"—led his coach to stick him under the basket. Now, although Stretch is still a young man at 39, it's clear that the athletic ambitions he once had for himself are invested in Lance—and have been for some time. When Little Lance, as his parents called him, was a baby, his father held him in his arms and told him he was "gonna be a superstar." By the time Lance was ready for high school, he was talented enough (one scouting service had ranked him as the number-one sixth grader in America) that he could have landed a scholarship to any of the various prep schools across the country that specialize in grooming future NBA players, to say nothing of some of the Catholic school powerhouses in New York City or just across the river in New Jersey. But Stretch had something else in mind, and he sent him to Lincoln. "We came in with a plan," he explained. "And our plan was to come in here, play well, win from day one, win four city championships, get the New York scoring record, and to leave."

The plan has entailed sacrifices. When Lincoln left New York to play against some of the powerful prep schools Lance had spurned, Stretch couldn't believe the resources those schools had at their disposal: While Lincoln didn't even have a trainer, these prep schools boasted whirlpools and ultrasound machines. He was also concerned about the quality of the coaching Lance had received. "I think Tiny does a good job with what he gets or whatever, but he only gets the kids from 4:30 to 6:30," Stretch told me. "That's not enough time to develop anybody." Even worse, Stretch believed Lance's outsized success on the New York stage had caused people to turn against his son. "Right now, Lance is playing against everybody, not just the opposing team. He's playing against the referees, he's playing against his own team," Stretch said. "At the end of the games, when they announce, 'MVP, Lance Stephenson,' man, people are tired of that shit. . . . He's like the Yankees now."

Which made Stretch George Steinbrenner. His involvement in his son's life is extensive. He and Bernadette, who works for the city's housing authority, are at virtually all of Lance's games and many of his practices. "I'm the one that do all the thinking for him," Stretch explained. "He just concentrates on playing. . . . I even tell him, 'Don't even talk to the refs.' I say that I'll get at 'em for you from the bleachers." This involvement is viewed

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by many as meddling, and, in the basketball world, Stretch has become something of a villain. "There is a cloud around the family," one recruiting analyst told me. Stretch was incredulous about such criticism. "It's a mom *and* a dad here, it's not just a mom by herself, and I guess people don't like that," he said. "Hell, I thought that was the thing to do, but when you get in the middle of this, you find out that people look at me as a nuisance." The criticism only made him and Bernadette draw a tighter circle around Lance. And, if this meant that, along with keeping at bay those who wanted to exploit their son, they also turned away those who truly did want to help him, then so be it. "We came in strong as a unit, the same unit. We only added one new member, and that's the baby," Stretch said. "No one else is gonna infiltrate."

And yet, despite all these sacrifices, despite his feeling of having to be constantly on guard, almost paranoid, about the people around his son, Stretch was actually happy with how things were turning out. Lance was just a few more 20-plus-point performances away from breaking Telfair's scoring record, and, after yesterday's game, the Railsplitters seemed to be rounding into form to make their run for a fourth straight city championship. Stretch pointed to a gaudy ring with an L surrounded by blue stones that he was wearing on his right hand, one of the three his son had received for his city titles. "I'm always telling people, 'You all wish you could do this!' "

Practice had ended about 15 minutes earlier, and the gym was now empty except for Stretch, me, and Lance, who, unlike his father, is known for his reticence and was sitting on the floor a few feet from us, texting on his cell phone. Stretch looked over at his son: "I told him his freshman year in high school [after he won his first city championship], 'If your career ended today, you did more than I ever did for basketball.' And that's the truth. So he already exceeded what I did, by far." He couldn't fathom Lance achieving these things anywhere else. Although he had dreams of Lance making the NBA and taking the family out of Coney Island, the most important thing to Stretch, it seemed, was his son earning a place in the pantheon of New York high school basketball. The mythology of the city game, as tattered and decrepit as it may be, was still powerful to him, and, because of that, his son, in some ways, had become a prisoner to it. "If you're gonna do it, you gotta do it in New York," Stretch said. "It was never a doubt. It couldn't be no other city."

Nine days later, Stephenson broke the scoring record, going for 24 points in Lincoln's win in the Brooklyn Borough Championship game. That victory gave the Railsplitters their customary top seed in the PSAL playoffs, featuring the city's 16 best teams.

After the Railsplitters' quarterfinal game at St. John's University—in which they held off a scrappy but undermanned vocational school called East New York Transit—a tall white man in a pressed Oxford shirt named Tom Konchalski waited outside the teams' locker rooms. When the Transit players emerged, he invited the seniors to try out for "the scholarship game"—an event he helps run for New York City players who do not yet have college scholarship offers. When he saw the Lincoln players, many of whom already have such offers, he congratulated them on their win. Every player, including Stephenson, shook Konchalski's hand and gave him his full attention.

Konchalski, who is 62 years old, has been a fixture at New York City basketball games for more than half a century. As a boy growing up in Queens, he and his older brother would take the subway all over the city to watch Connie Hawkins on New York's playgrounds. And, although Konchalski himself never played the game—"The most athletic thing I've ever done in my life is jump to a conclusion," he likes to say—he developed a keen eye for talent. Today, he publishes something called the *HSBI Report*, a newsletter he sends to about 220 college coaches, who pay $400 per year for his assessments of high school players.

When Konchalski quit his job teaching junior high math to write for the newsletter in the early '80s, New York City high school basketball was in the middle of a golden era, oftentimes having as many as three teams ranked in *USA Today*'s top 25. Konchalski, who does not drive, was able to fill up much of the publication simply by riding the subway from game to game. But, with New York's basketball fortunes having declined, you're now just as likely to see Konchalski taking notes on a yellow legal pad in a gym in D.C. or Philly or the Tidewater of Virginia as you are in New York; he's become intimately familiar with Amtrak and the Eastern Seaboard's regional rail systems, as well as an expert at bumming rides. (He refuses, however, to own a computer, a cell phone, or even an answering machine; he writes his newsletter on a typewriter and sends it out using snail mail.) "The game was initially an urban game and an Eastern game," he says, "but it's a national game now."

Konchalski first met Stephenson when Lance was ten years old and was introduced to the scout as "the fourth best fourth-grader in New York City." ("I'd like to see who the top three were," Konchalski says now.) Since then, he's tracked Stephenson's progress and has occasionally offered him advice. When Stephenson was on the verge of getting cut from the USA Under-18 team this past summer for his bad attitude, the team's coaches asked Konchalski to have a word with the young star. Konchalski recalls, "I said, 'Listen, Lance, what's going to determine how far you go in this game and what's going to determine how far you go in life is not your skills or how much you improve your shooting, it's how you learn to deal with frustration and adversity when things don't go well for you.' " After the talk, Stephenson had his best practice of the tryouts. According to Konchalski, "Jim Boeheim said to me, 'What did you tell him? And can you put that on a tape so we can play it back for him?' " Alas, Stephenson returned to his earlier poor form in subsequent practices and was cut a few days later.

Konchalski, who goes to daily Mass and reads *First Things* on his train rides between games, forgives Stephenson for this and other trespasses. "I don't think Lance is a bad kid, I think he has bad body language," he told me in between bites of matzoh ball soup in a diner across the street from St. John's. "I think he has matured. He still has a way to go, but I think he's really trying, and that's all you can ask."

The scout had any number of ideas as to why New York's basketball fortunes had declined. Part of it was the hype machine. Another problem, he believed, was talent dilution. Not only were good players now leaving New York for New Jersey and for prep schools, but the ones who were staying were being spread too thinly across the city. He mentioned that last year there were 180 varsity boys basketball teams in the PSAL. "Banana Kelly is the name of one school," Konchalski said. "Urban Peace is the name of another one. Shouldn't that be a given? Urban Peace? Who's their rival? Guerrilla Warfare?" It was impossible to cover that many teams with quality coaches, not to mention quality teammates.

Indeed, the problem of talent dilution is perhaps even more pronounced on the summer AAU circuit (which is, in some ways, more important than the high school season in terms of college recruiting). In the 1980s and '90s, New York City had two dominant AAU programs, the Riverside Hawks in Harlem and the Gauchos in the Bronx. But, about ten years

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ago, the teams came under a cloud when the founders of both programs were accused of sexual misconduct. Although the allegations were never proven in either case, the controversy cracked the teams' monopoly, and it wasn't long before competing AAU squads were springing up all over the city—many of which were one-man teams. "You'll have a guy who thinks he's found a kid who's going to be the next great NBA player, and then he'll go around the neighborhood and get eight other kids and then create a program based around that one young man," says the New York Panthers' Gary Charles. "And then, he'll make a phone call saying, 'Can I get a shoe contract?'" Stephenson himself became part of this phenomenon. After playing several seasons for the Juice All-Stars, an Adidas-sponsored team that's run by Tiny Morton, last summer he left to play for a new Adidas-sponsored club called Raising Champions, which was founded by Stretch. "If a sneaker company wants a kid, getting his high school coach is good," says Ron Naclerio, who coaches at Cardozo High School in Queens, "but getting the kid's father is even better."

At the diner, Konchalski pondered the various theories. He believed they each held some truth, but, taken as a whole, they seemed unsatisfying. He was as perplexed as anyone about what was wrong with New York City basketball. He took comfort in the fact that "every year there are a ton of low- to mid-Division I players coming out of New York City"—the kinds of kids who'd soon be playing in the scholarship game. And yet, he knew that something with New York basketball was broken. The game wasn't at the center of the city's life as it once had been. First, in the 1950s and '60s, the white middle class had left the city for Long Island and Westchester County and, in the process of becoming suburbanized, lost interest in the game. And now, even in the inner-city neighborhoods where the game had thrived, Konchalski believed its popularity was flagging. When he walked by playgrounds, the courts weren't as full as they used to be. "There are so many more leisure options for kids," he said.

Worst of all, he'd reached the reluctant conclusion that the New York basketball culture he grew up in—the culture he loved—was now more of a hindrance than a help to a player who had dreams of becoming a star. "Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn," he said, "but, if he hadn't moved to North Carolina when he was a little boy, he wouldn't have been Michael Jordan." Konchalski seemed pained by this. "If he'd stayed in New York," he continued, "he would have been spoiled, he would have lost his hunger, he would have become complacent. And he would have had to have been a celebrity, he would have had to have been Michael Jackson in addition to Michael Jordan. He would have become a performance artist, and he would have cared a lot less."

Jordan, who's responsible for some of the greatest basketball performances in Madison Square Garden's history, didn't play at "The World's Most Famous Arena" until he was a freshman in college. Stephenson first played at the Garden when he was a freshman in high school. It's one of the few perks afforded to players in the PSAL: Every year, the two teams that advance through the playoffs to the city championship game get to face each other in the Garden. Any player would be excited for a championship game, but Stephenson said the arena itself, with its history and aura, inspired him to raise his game to an even higher level. As a sophomore, he scored 29 points in Lincoln's championship game victory. As a junior, he went for 27. "I just get hyped," Stephenson told me a few weeks before this year's championship game, trying to explain what came over him when he played in the Garden. "All of a sudden, it's like, I don't miss shots there."

A little before noon on a Saturday in late March, Stephenson took the floor for his final city championship game. If there was any doubt that he would perform as he had in the past at the Garden, it was erased almost immediately. His first shot—an 18-foot jumper from the baseline—swished cleanly through the net. He scored his next basket just a few seconds later off a steal and a layup. Not long after that, he stripped the ball from his opponent under the basket and dribbled the length of the court, slaloming through defenders, before taking off just inside the foul line and gracefully banking the ball off the backboard and into the hoop. At one point, the opposing team, John F. Kennedy High School, had 14 points, while Stephenson had 16. Although foul trouble would eventually limit him to just eight more points, he'd delivered the knockout blow so early that Kennedy could never recover, and, when the game was over, Lincoln had won its fourth straight city title, 78 to 56. Stephenson was now an icon.

Not that many people in New York noticed. Most of the Garden's 19,000 seats were empty for Stephenson's historic achievement. Ever since a brawl broke out between fans at the city championship game two years ago, the Garden had allowed the PSAL to play the game there only on the condition that ticket sales to the general public were prohibited; instead, each school was given 500 tickets and the PSAL a few thousand to distribute to guests. Even if the general public had been invited, it's not clear many people would have bothered showing up. The public interest in high school basketball in the city just isn't there anymore. As a *New York Post* writer told me after the game, Stephenson's record fourth championship would merit just 500 words in the next day's paper, buried "behind the Yankees, the NCAA tournament, and anything else that happens today." While that might be more than a high school star in most cities could ever expect, it paled in comparison to the attention showered on the New York legends whom Stephenson had theoretically just surpassed.

At that moment, though, Stephenson seemed unaware of how far the game's stature had fallen in the city. He sat in a chair and cried while his mother cradled his head and a teammate whispered in his ear, "You did it, boy!" Eventually, he regained his composure, and, while his teammates danced and hugged on the court, he stood apart from them and tried to put into words what he felt he'd achieved. He was unusually voluble. "I wanted four cities more than anything," Stephenson said. "I wanted to do this since eighth grade. I saw Sebastian get three, I'm like, 'I want to beat him, I want to get more.'" A man who worked for the Garden tried to break up the mini–press conference—there was a Rangers hockey game in a few hours, and the basketball court needed to be replaced with an ice rink—but Stephenson wasn't finished. He talked about the standard he'd set for other New York City high school players and how hard it would be for them to match. "I don't think nobody will ever do that again," he predicted, "because it takes work, you gotta be focused, you gotta be dedicated to the basketball."

Then Stephenson's thoughts turned to the future. He said that in ten days he'd announce where he was going to college—either to Kansas, Maryland, or St. John's. And, after college, the NBA. He was confident about what lay ahead. "I'm ready, I'm ready, I'm ready," he said. "I'm born ready for all challenges." He began to talk about his teammates and how much they meant to him, but the Garden employee was back. "Guys, please, we've got a hockey game," the man said. Stephenson resumed his reverie. "Lance, stop talking," the employee snapped. And, with that, Stephenson's moment came to an end. He walked off the court and, he hoped, into history. ◆

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

COURAGE AND DARING

Steve McQueen is a well-known British artist who is becoming a well-known film-maker. *Hunger*, his first feature film, is less a promising work than a fulfillment. It has nothing to do with Knut Hamsun's famous novel of the same title (beautifully filmed in 1966). It deals with the Irish Troubles, specifically the hunger strike in a Northern Ireland prison led by Bobby Sands in 1981, a strike that led to his death and nine others.

The Troubles, including the Sands story, have been well treated in film—in *Some Mother's Son*, *Bloody Sunday*, and *In the Name of the Father*. But McQueen's film is not just one more. His film is certainly political in context, but it is not centrally about politics. It is, as he says, "an abstraction of what it is to die for a cause." This is a different and even more awesome subject, not topical but timeless.

The previous films that McQueen has done were, I gather, *objets d'art*, made for museums and galleries. This is his first film made with actors. He needed a writer, and he did not want an experienced screenwriter because, he says, they tell an audience too much. He engaged an Irish playwright named Enda Walsh to collaborate with him, and after much research and interviewing, they created a script unlike any I know. It is in three distinct parts. The first part and the third have almost no dialogue. The second part is a conversation between two men. Odd though the structure is, it comes to seem inevitable for this film—thus a proof of McQueen's unusual vision.

Bobby Sands does not appear in the first part. That section, about forty minutes long, concentrates on a guard in Sands's prison. McQueen says, in an interview in the latest *Cinéaste*, that he had read somewhere that Godard had said the only way to film the Holocaust is through the eyes of a guard. With these Irish prisoners, McQueen follows the comment in the opening part. *Hunger* begins in the home of a guard named Lohan, washing up in the morning, having breakfast, then leaving for work after he looks under his car for bombs. In the course of the day he goes through some rote procedures, which include office routines and the beating of naked prisoners in a corridor gauntlet. Between tasks, we sometimes see Lohan alone, smoking, shaking. Subsequently he goes to a nursing home to visit an older woman, his mother presumably. She has been rendered mute and unresponsive by a stroke, so she cannot respond to what happens to Lohan right in front of her.

The second part brings in Sands, but in an unusual way. In a medium shot, we see him and a priest on opposite sides of a plain table in an otherwise deserted visitors' room in the prison. They are backlit by a window in the far wall. They smoke. (The priest provides the cigarettes.) They speak together, says McQueen, for seventeen and a half minutes—one shot, fixed, gratifying—before we cut to close-ups of Sands and the priest. It is not the novelty of the idea that fascinates—introducing the main character well along in the film and doing it in a fixed double shot. By the time we get there, McQueen has convinced us that any conventional procedure would be unworthy.

HUNGER
IFC Films

AMERICAN SWING
Magnolia Pictures

His unique method enhances what these men say. The priest, a mature man, begins with what he later calls "priests' small talk," asking Sands about another priest whom they both know and indulging in some unpriestly professional jealousy. (Expletives in both men are not forced but are not forsaken.) Sands knows that this talk is only the warm-up, but he takes it as such, and when they come to their real subject, he is quietly ready and willing. He is going on a hunger strike to protest the order to wear prison garb. (In the first part, we have already seen this refusal in other prisoners.) He holds that he and his friends are not criminals and should be treated as prisoners of war. Stripped to the few possibilities of protest in prison, he makes this clothing matter a major issue. It is worth, he believes, his life.

He speaks simply about this belief—in essence a belief that life must be lived to a purpose. This is the purpose that has been afforded him here, to give his life for a principle, a freedom, that may help to enrich life after he has left it. The priest counters often with the church's proscription of suicide and, in Sands's terms, with questionings of his belief. The priest fails. We feel that, disappointed though he is, he admires Sands. The only way he can show it is to leave Sands the pack of cigarettes.

Part Three distills into a half-hour or so the sixty-six days of Sands's course into death. As in the first part, the dialogue is sparse. We see his physical decline with some detail, just enough. We see that at every mealtime he is brought a tray of food that he doesn't touch. There is no force-feeding. His parents visit during these days, always taciturn, always accepting of his decision. They even bring his burial clothes. A closing credit tells us that, during his strike, Sands was elected

ANTHONY RUSSO

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to Parliament by Fermanagh and South Tyrone in Northern Ireland. We are not told that, all through the strike, his face was on Irish television every day with the number of the day.

In addition to the unique frame of the whole film, the framing of every shot—with Sean Bobbitt at the camera—shows an eye for the relation of detail to major elements. The pace of events is not so much slow as undisturbed. (A number of recent films by independent directors have been paced in opposition to the time-span rush of the present day. Some film-makers are resisting the supposedly universal injunction to feed the eye at the expense of everything else.)

"I had never worked with actors before, but I thought it best to be truthful with them and I think they found that quite shocking," McQueen says. Shocked or otherwise, the three principals embody what McQueen presumably was after in their characters, Stuart Graham as Lohan, Liam Cunningham as the priest, and Michael Fassbender—simple, without pretentious glow—as Sands. The good news: with McQueen's first feature, an open, fine, inquiring artist has joined the film world.

Is the idea of time capsules still around? If so, here is a candidate, a documentary called *American Swing*. The subject is not pop music of past decades but sexual swinging. This film by Matthew Kaufman and Jon Hart is about a Manhattan sex club called Plato's Retreat in the late 1970s. It tries to view the founder, a man named Larry Levenson, as a hero who needs memorializing, but the real subject is his club and its patrons. If this film is dug up in a time capsule a century hence, our descendants will see what some people in the twentieth century thought was sexual liberation, right after the liberating Sixties.

Levenson started his club because, he said, there were only gay sex clubs, none for heterosexuals. His place had some rules. Among them: no one was admitted fully dressed. Couples were preferred but were not expected to stay together. Anything that anyone wanted to do or say was acceptable if the other person or persons accepted it. Relatively private rooms were available but were not always used. Groups of nude people around a pool were variously entangled.

The film is built—serviceably—of recent interviews with former staff members intercut with footage of patrons made back in the glory days. This 1970s footage is the first of the picture's interests. The people who swung at Plato's apparently wanted to be known for it. Time-capsule viewers will see that knowledge of their presence mattered to many of the swingers as much as the swinging itself. Thinkers of the future might ponder if this implies a need for moral standards—in order to snub them. The reveling in this film, frank as it is, doesn't seem to be free-flying rapture. It seems like a jailbreak, escape from the guardians of propriety. I kept hearing the unspoken words: "Look at *this*, mom and dad! Look at *this*, *Reader's Digest*!"

All the male patrons were white: I caught one glimpse of a black female. I didn't see race mentioned in the rules, but possibly, as late as the 1970s, restrictions were sometimes assumed.

The publicity about Plato's was of course loud. Some media people visited the club, and some reported from the outside—or at least wanted to seem as if they did. Even the big television talk shows of the time—David Susskind and Phil Donahue—had Levenson and his friends on their programs and tried to be calmly judicious about the matters discussed. (Today there might be less condescension and more detail.)

For a few years Levenson prospered. Then he had tax troubles, served a prison term, and tried to open another Plato's, but was crushed by the arrival of AIDS. He ended up driving a cab, then had a fatal heart attack. He is still remembered fondly by some. Their memories—the recent interviews with past patrons—bring an unexpected poignancy to the film. Now elderly and plump, they sit on their sofas speaking about their visits to Plato's as if remembering family excursions. Husbands and wives nod at each other about the strangers they embraced there. One couple even descends from those memories into cozy incidentals. They recall the food that Levenson provided on the buffet. The wife names the various dishes. The husband adds: "And cole slaw." "Cole slaw," agrees the wife.

The almost requisite, airily sophisticated tag for a factual film of sexual display is "sad," but these latter-day conversations give the word a deeper color. With those older patrons, Plato's seems further away than the 1970s. That surprising rue—about time's passage—slips in. Perhaps future capsule viewers, too, may be emotionally nudged by the gray-haired former swingers. Even though the sexual antics of the past will possibly seem superfluous a century hence, the pathos of those nostalgic oldsters may, in human terms, link them to the future. Possibly, too, the cole slaw. ◆

Keith Christiansen

FACTS AND LOVE

The tender power of Giovanni Bellini.

I.

This has been quite a time for those interested in the art of the Italian Renaissance: major exhibitions on the Renaissance portrait (at the Prado, Madrid and the National Gallery, London), the relationship between Florentine and Netherlandish painting (at the Palazzo Pitti, Florence), and love and marriage (The Metropolitan Museum, New York); and displays of the work of the north Italian sculptors Antico (Palazzo Ducale, Mantua) and Riccio (The Frick Collection, New York) as well as the painters Correggio (Galleria Borghese, Rome and Galleria Nazionale, Parma), that eccentric of Bolognese painting, Amico Aspertini (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna), Andrea Mantegna (Louvre, Paris) and Giovanni Bellini (Scuderie Papali al Quirinale, Rome). Even for those of us whose profession entails keeping abreast of these things, it has been an excess of riches, impossible to take in—which, of course, is why catalogues exist.

Especially the conjunction of exhibitions devoted to Mantegna and Bellini provided an opportunity not to be missed. After all, the relative merits of the work of these two towering figures, who were related by marriage, were discussed already in the fifteenth century and have continued to engage modern critics. Even before I saw the exhibition in Rome and the marvelous works it brought together, my mind had already turned to Giovanni Bellini last summer, when I was contacted with a tip by two colleagues at the Frick Collection in New York. "You'll want to come down and see *Saint Francis in the Desert*," they said. "It's been removed from its normal room, which is under renovation, and is hanging

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in the rotunda. The light is marvelous and you'll see it in a new way."

To judge from the response that this almost incidental event elicited, in the press and among aficionados of the Frick, Bellini's painting ranks very high indeed with art lovers in New York. It is, arguably, one of the two greatest Renaissance paintings in America, the other being Titian's *The Rape of Europa* in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. And the all-too-brief move of the Frick's painting from a room lit laterally by a suite of curtained windows looking out onto Fifth Avenue to a skylit gallery underscored the way illumination had the effect of transforming one's experience of a work of art, much as the acoustics in a concert hall can alter the way one hears a piece of music.

Never, to my memory, had the dawn coloring the distant landscape and illuminating the towers of the walled city and castle that crown a cultivated hill—never had this dawn appeared quite so golden. Or the fields where a shepherd grazes his sheep, and a gray heron and donkey stand as though transfixed, looked so lush. The blue-tinged rock formations in the foreground, where the saint is shown standing, barefoot, before his rustic study—an arbor ingeniously constructed of branches lashed together to support a grape vine—seemed both palpable and visionary in a way that I had not previously recognized. In its rapt attention to detail—the hollyhock and rosemary that grow from the carefully tended flower bed; the skull, book, and cross that adorn the saint's desk; the small kingfisher perched below the fountain spigot in a dank cleavage in the rocky ledge—this is a painting that invites slow and attentive viewing: total absorption, absolute engagement.

The picture has often been called a hymn to nature and its subject identified, somewhat romantically and almost certainly incorrectly, as Saint Francis composing his famous "Canticle of All Created Things"—the poem that earned the thirteenth-century friar his place as the patron saint of environmentalists. In 1525, the picture was described quite simply as showing "Saint Francis in the desert [painted] in oil . . . and it has a meticulously finished landscape [that is] marvelously observed." More likely than not, the actual subject is Saint Francis receiving the stigmata on Mount Alverna, an event that is said to have occurred in 1224. This would explain the small red marks on the saint's extended hands and foot, and it would explain why his wooden clogs have been removed: he stands on ground consecrated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. It would explain the rays of light—miraculous rays, not sunlight—that stream through the clouds to the left of the laurel tree that bends its spindly trunk as though in homage to the saint. It would explain the shepherd who pauses and turns to gaze toward the mountaintop grotto, and the docile donkey and bird who, like the shepherd, have mistaken the light bathing Saint Francis for the real light of dawn—as recounted in early Franciscan literature.

The picture surface has been cropped along the top edge, and I have long believed that a minute seraph, such as is traditionally included in scenes of the stigmatization, was once shown in the missing area. Still, as one learned commentator has noted, although the picture is "full of narrative and historical *allusions* . . . it is not itself a 'story' bound by space and time." Rather, the picture has been conceived as a meditation on the theme of Saint Francis's union with God. In other words, it is the manner of representation rather than the actual subject that is exceptional. Bellini has eliminated precisely the quality of dramatic moment that traditionally defined the event.

On one point everyone agrees: the beauty of Bellini's picture resides in its vision of nature—a landscape experienced as intensely in the imagination of its creator as the hills above Tintern Abbey were experienced by Wordsworth on his return after five years' absence. It is as though, taking his point of departure from the simple but ecstatic language of Saint Francis's hymn to God's creation, Bellini had set out to convey the kind of oneness of Nature that is also at the heart of Wordsworth's verses. I am thinking especially of the lines in which the great Romantic poet declares, "I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things." Except, of course, that for Bellini that "motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things" is the "*altissimo, omnipotente, bon Signore*"—the highest, omnipotent, good Lord, to whom Saint Francis addressed his canticle.

Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis in the Desert*, circa 1480

COURTESY THE FRICK COLLECTION

What sets Bellini's art apart from that of every other Renaissance painter is this quality of serenity—even when the subject might be thought to require dramatic presentation—coupled with an intense engagement with nature. Landscape for him is

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never simply a setting—an appropriate backdrop—for a religious narrative. Nor is it the mere transcription of a topographical site; indeed, no painting of his can be shown to depict a specific place. Rather, it is through the landscape backgrounds of Bellini's paintings that the mood is struck and the emotional tenor of his theme conveyed, whether the story concerns Saint Francis or a hermit saint in the wilderness, or the Crucifixion, or the Transfiguration, or the Baptism of Christ. (Not even Piero della Francesca can match the sacral stillness that pervades Bellini's haunting *Baptism of Christ* in the church of Santa Corona, in Vicenza, in which the life-size figures are set against a mountainous landscape, their ritualistic gestures arrested as though time itself had stopped.)

In several of Bellini's most memorable altarpieces of the Madonna and Child with saints, the lateral walls of the fictive chapel in which the holy figures have assembled are eliminated so as to provide tantalizing views onto a distant landscape, further adding to the quality of meditative calm that is the hallmark of this painter's art. As noted by Roger Fry in his study of the artist written at the close of the nineteenth century—before he became the prophet of modernism and the champion of Cézanne—"Bellini shows already that perception of the emotional value of passing effects of atmosphere, which is often supposed to be a peculiarity of the art of this century."

A couple of years ago, while standing in front of Bellini's masterpiece at the Frick, I overheard the conversation of someone enthusiastically taking a friend around the collection for what must have been his companion's first visit. He indicated that the Bellini was one of his favorite paintings. "Yeah," responded his friend, "but too bad he had to put that monk in the picture"—as though the figure of Saint Francis was an insertion or an afterthought to an otherwise beautiful landscape. So let us be very clear on the matter: Bellini's art is *not* first and foremost a celebration of nature. Nor did he ever paint, or even think of painting, a pure landscape. Recent scholarship has remarked upon the fact that his pictures invariably invite the viewer to make imaginary pilgrimages that involve choices between diverging paths, one often leading to an isolated hermitage, another to cultivated fields and urban sites, sometimes shown in a state of decay.

In other words, Bellini's landscapes are constructs of the imagination, and they have a religious-moral dimension. They are informed by an idea of life as a pilgrimage in which the choices we make lead either to redemption or damnation. It is a theme of late medieval devotional literature, and it is found as well in fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting, which Bellini deeply admired. The contrast that Bellini sets up in the Frick *Saint Francis* between the barren grotto in the foreground and the pastoral landscape in the background is, among other things, a lesson in the decisions that lead to union with God. A similar contrast is found in his paintings of the ascetic Saint Jerome seated before a grotto (often with a lizard or snake climbing on the rocks) and a lush landscape in the distance, as well as in his depictions of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. Even in his paintings of the Madonna and Child—the most conventional of all subjects in Italian art and the mainstay of his busy workshop—there is often a landscape that offers the devout viewer sites for contemplation and reflection.

Consider, for example, the marvelous *Madonna and Child* in the Metropolitan Museum, a work acquired in 1908 on the recommendation of Roger Fry. Painted in the late 1480s, it shows the Madonna seated behind a parapet. She solicits our attention with a sidelong glance as she gently cradles her infant son, who holds what I take to be a quince. The rust-colored cloth of honor behind the figures is drawn back at the left to reveal a distant landscape in which, to one side of a winding path, are bare trees and fallow fields, while on the other side the hills have turned green and a tree near the well-kept houses is in full foliage. Beyond the jagged profile of the Alps, the clouds are colored by the dawn of a new day. Just as we understand the bitter fruit that the Christ Child holds to stand for the Fall of Man, so in the landscape we discern an allegory of rebirth and redemption—but one rendered in such compellingly everyday terms that a modern viewer might be forgiven for not apprehending the moral implications. Henry James put it well in *Italian Hours*, when he noted that Bellini's pictures have "a richness of sanctity that is almost profane."

That Bellini projected himself into his landscapes there really can be no doubt. And that he actually preferred treating devotional subjects as opposed to secular ones is documented by a series of revealing letters regarding a singular commission placed with him in 1501 by Isabella d'Este, the spoiled, demanding, art-loving marchioness of Mantua. She had in mind an elaborate allegory to complement two canvases by Andrea Mantegna for display in her private study, where she kept her finest works of art. No sooner had Bellini accepted the offer than he began a protracted effort to change the terms of the commission. Narrative painting was not his forte, he claimed; his picture would inevitably suffer by comparison with those of Mantegna—the court painter at Mantua celebrated for his ability to give visual form to abstract concepts.

Isabella, who had already made an advance payment, was unhappy, then threatening, but eventually settled on a painting of the Nativity with small-scale figures in a landscape setting: something she could hang in her bedroom. Bellini agreed, and then once again attempted—this time unsuccessfully—to substitute a more standard depiction of half-length figures of the Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist in a landscape setting (a picture for which he could have recycled motifs already in hand). In the event, he delivered Isabella's painting three years behind schedule. Remarkably, not only was she satisfied with the result, but with admirable persistence she approached him a second time for an allegory. This time she enlisted the assistance of the great poet Pietro Bembo, who wrote the marchioness that the pictorial program that had been sent would have to be submitted for Bellini's approval as he disliked constraints on his imagination, and preferred, so he said, "to wander at will in his pictures," so that they might give satisfaction to others as well to himself.

This exceptional series of letters says volumes about Bellini the artist. He was, first and foremost, an artist of devotional themes, the landscape settings of which involved self-projection—the artist as pilgrim—and presuppose a similar engagement by the viewer. The original way in which his paintings treat standard religious themes, such as the stigmatization of Saint Francis or the Madonna and Child, is the direct result of this peculiarly associative and empathetic approach to painting—something quite different from the narrative focus of Mantegna's art, with its emphasis on sharp emotion and dramatic moment. We might say that one was a master of prose, interested in probing the foibles of humankind, and the other a poet in search of spiritual harmony.

What makes Bellini's engagement with nature so remarkable is that he was born and lived continuously in Venice—in a densely urban environment far from the lush landscapes that he depicts. Late in life

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he may have owned a villa on the *terraferma*, but unlike his father Jacopo, who was also a painter and as a youth had crossed the Apennines to Florence and later worked in Ferrara, Verona, and Padua, and unlike his brother Gentile, who in 1479 traveled as far as Istanbul to paint for the sultan, Giovanni Bellini seems to have been a sedentary artist. His workaday world was defined by the narrow alleys and *campi* of the *Serenissima*, as the Venetian state was called. And, of course, by the waters of the lagoon that surround the city, and by the canals that run through it.

It comes as no surprise that he was able to capture, as no other fifteenth-century painter had done, the changing effects of light playing on the rippled surface of water—perhaps most astonishingly and precociously in the river in which Saint Christopher stands in Bellini's early altarpiece in the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice. (One need only walk outside the church to the canal that borders the *campo* to appreciate Bellini's powers of observation.) But how did he come to master the complex and ravishing landscapes of his mature paintings, such as the Frick *Saint Francis*—landscapes that take one well beyond the compositional formulas that he learned from his father, and the delicate, atmospheric backgrounds that he studied in the various Netherlandish paintings that were in the city? Was the catalyst a memorable trip south, along the Adriatic coast, to the town of Pesaro, for which, in the mid-1470s he painted one of his grandest works, the *Coronation of the Virgin,* still to be seen in the Museo Civico of the city? (This astonishing altarpiece—over sixteen feet high, Bellini's answer to the challenge of Mantegna's earlier polyptych in the church of San Zeno in Verona—opened the recent exhibition in Rome, paradoxically placing one of the climaxes of the exhibition before the artist's more tentative beginnings.)

There is no documentary evidence that Bellini made such a trip, and the normal procedure would have been to paint the altarpiece in Venice and ship it to Pesaro. But I can think of no other possible explanation for the transformation that we see in his work. Either he traveled to Pesaro to sign the contract or to supervise the installation of the enormous altarpiece. Along the way he must have filled a notebook with detailed drawings of whatever captured his imagination, since he introduced buildings in Ravenna, Rimini, and Ancona into some of his later paintings. In Ancona and in Rimini he could have seen frescoes by Piero della Francesca, and these may have confirmed his desire to achieve an effect of simplicity, order, and luminosity in his paintings. There must also have been marvelous drawings of vegetation and of the varied, hilly landscape of the region of the Marches, to which he could refer when composing landscapes back in his urban studio. Bellini would have followed the same procedure when, at the end of the decade, he painted his marvelous *Transfiguration* (now in the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples), for the cathedral of Vicenza, west of Venice.

These trips would help to explain how it came to pass that in the late 1470s Bellini became, quite simply, the greatest landscape painter in Europe. Indeed, so complete is his mastery that we scarcely think to ask ourselves why it is that this close observer of nature never introduced his native city into his religious paintings. It was the itinerant Sicilian painter, Antonello da Messina, who showed Saint Sebastian bound to a tree trunk incongruously growing in the middle of a paved Venetian *campo*, and it was Gentile Bellini and Carpaccio—not Giovanni Bellini—who have left us the most memorable images of the city.

Attempts have been made to find parallels for Bellini's mature achievement as a painter of landscape in the poetry of his time, especially in the Petrarchan verses of Pietro Bembo, who became a close friend of the artist. Yet compared to Bellini's landscapes, Bembo's pastoral evocations seem shaped by poetic conventions, and they lack the quality of observation, the descriptive richness and the emotional depth, of the painter's work. It is Titian, not Bellini, who was the interpreter of the conventions of pastoral poetry. In a lecture delivered in 1833, no less a figure than Constable drew a fundamental distinction between Titian's and Bellini's landscapes by remarking that Bellini imitated nature "in what has been termed a servile manner." And in his still fundamental book on landscape painting published in 1949, Kenneth Clark attempted to describe how this "servility" to the appearance of nature acquired a poetic dimension. "Bellini's landscapes are the supreme instance of facts transfigured through love," he declared. He then elaborated on ideas culled from Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, observing that "few artists have been capable of such universal love, which embraces every twig, every stone, the humblest detail as well as the most grandiose perspective, and can only be attained by a profound humility."

"Universal love . . . profound humility." Not many will be satisfied with this leap from a description of style—a "servile manner"—to an analysis of character. And yet I have never encountered anyone who did not, on the basis of their deep response to Bellini's paintings, feel that he must have been a generous and even a spiritual man. Of course, the problem with this assumption is that it confuses Bellini the man, about whom we know very little indeed, with Bellini the professional artist, whose financial success depended on the devotional efficacy of his paintings. But if we should not underestimate the sheer power of Bellini's artistry, neither should we deny the possibility that he did indeed possess the rare qualities of spirit that find expression in his art.

II.

So what do we know about Giovanni Bellini, the man and the artist? He was the son—almost certainly illegitimate—of Jacopo Bellini, who played a key role in introducing the principles of Renaissance painting into Venice; and the half-brother of Gentile Bellini, his father's artistic heir; and the brother-in-law of Andrea Mantegna, who married his older sister Nicolosia. His cousin, Leonardo Bellini, was a talented illuminator of manuscripts and on occasion may have collaborated with Bellini. Painting in Venice was often a family affair, and this was certainly true of the Bellini family. When Jacopo died, his workshop activity was divided between his two sons, Gentile taking over the lucrative commissions for portraiture and narrative painting for the confraternities of the city, Giovanni specializing in the production of altarpieces and paintings for private devotion. Only in 1479, when Gentile left for Istanbul, did Giovanni assume his half-brother's commissions in the Doge's Palace and receive the kind of official recognition that he deserved. His activity as a portraitist also begins about this time.

Like most Venetians of standing, he belonged to a religious confraternity—in fact, to two. These probably provided him with useful business contacts as well as religious activities. (The man who commissioned the Frick *Saint Francis* was a prominent member of one of these organizations.) We have no tax returns, but the indications are that Bellini was an astute businessman: he ran a bustling workshop that dominated the market for devotional images of the Madonna and Child, and in 1482 he was, exceptionally, exempted from the statutes of the Venetian Guild of Painters. By that date he was widely regarded as the outstanding painter in Venice, and few aspiring artists did not spend some time in his workshop.

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To Dürer, who visited the city in 1506, Bellini, although "very old," was "still best in painting." Even the appearance of Giorgione and Titian, both of whom had been Bellini's pupils, did not dim his reputation, and some of his most original masterpieces, including the *Feast of the Gods* in The National Gallery, Washington and the haunting *Drunkenness of Noah* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon, were painted during the last years of his life. How old he was when he died in 1516 is a matter of speculation, for we do not know the date of his birth: some have argued that it was as early as 1429, others that it was as late as 1440. (I favor a date more or less midway between these two extremes and believe that Bellini's earliest works date from the late 1450s.) Nor, for that matter, do we know when he married Ginevra Bocheta, or when his son Alvise was born.

A remarkable twist to this seemingly uneventful private life is provided by a humanist poem, written around 1506, that describes the aged Bellini—by that time both a widower and childless—in bed with a young boy as handsome as a Greek statue. Should this surprising window into his bedchamber alter the way we respond to the beautiful nude male figure of Saint Sebastian in Bellini's landmark altarpiece painted for the church of San Giobbe (now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)? Probably not, for Bellini was too great an artist to allow personal erotic desire to interfere with the devotional affect of his paintings. Instead we are bound to admire the way Bellini has contrived a figure that is at once serenely beautiful and yet completely naturalistic—a work that combined those qualities that Winckelmann admired in Greek statues and famously described as "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" without recourse to the exquisitely antiquarian style of the greatest sculptor then coming of age in Venice, Tullio Lombardo, whose marvelous statue of Adam in the Metropolitan Museum—tragically damaged in an accident in 2002—provides the most pertinent counterpoint to Bellini's achievement. (I have long believed that Bellini's collaboration with Tullio's father Pietro, who designed some of the frames of Bellini's altarpieces, was crucial to the painter's conception of architectural space; his sculptural reliefs also served as models for Bellini's depictions of the dead Christ supported by youthful angels against a black background.)

Although, like Mantegna, Bellini knew a number of prominent poets and humanists who penned praises of his work, he did not share his brother-in-law's antiquarian interests or espouse his rigorously intellectual approach to painting. His monochromatic depiction of the *Continence of Scipio* (now at the National Gallery in Washington) was intended to simulate a long marble relief, but the conceit falls flat and the work cannot be compared to Mantegna's brilliant companion canvas showing the introduction of the cult of Cybele in Rome (at the National Gallery in London), in which the limitations of relief sculpture are rigorously observed. At the same time, Bellini's paintings are the product of meticulous calculation. He perfected his knowledge of perspective under the tutelage of a certain Girolamo Malatini, but as Daniele Barbaro remarked in his sixteenth-century treatise, this mastery was employed not for show, but to enhance the impression of verisimilitude for the viewer. First and foremost, Bellini is an artist of space, light, and atmosphere. It is this that makes him the crucial figure in the transformation of Renaissance painting in Venice.

His capacity continually to expand the basis of his art is without parallel in the fifteenth century, and it has few later analogies (one thinks of Matisse, whose late works—like those of Bellini—seem to spring from a renewed and deepened engagement with life). From quite early in his career, he experimented with the possibilities offered by oil painting, which he combined with the more traditional tempera technique. He managed thereby to extend the range and the richness of his colors. There are analogies with Netherlandish practice, but Bellini seems to have developed his technique largely on his own, and the old idea that he learned oil painting from Antonello da Messina, who was in Venice in 1475–1476, has now largely been discounted by technical examination.

By the time Bellini painted the San Giobbe Altarpiece, around 1480, he was able to achieve a variety of effects that would have been impossible employing the meticulous technique of egg tempera. First and foremost, oil enabled him to paint broadly on a large surface without loss of detail. Textural variety was also increased by the use of impasto. And the modeling becomes fused and the contours of his figures soften. The architectural setting of the Virgin and her court—a fictive chapel whose details match those of the monumental marble frame designed by Pietro Lombardo, and still in the church—is suffused with a soft light that plays gently over the figures and picks out the shimmer of the gold mosaic apse, creating a serene harmony peculiarly conducive to meditation.

No simple devotional style of painting, this. It is, rather, an innovative and carefully considered deployment of perspective and optics to create an effect of physical presence: "a richness of sanctity that is almost profane." One need only compare Bellini's altarpiece with the work of Botticelli and Filippino Lippi in Florence, or with that of Mantegna in Mantua or Piero della Francesca in Urbino, to appreciate the scope of his achievement. Bellini freed himself from the twin shadows of Mantegna and Netherlandish painting that fell so strongly across his early work, and created the basis for the art of Giorgione and Titian and, by extension, of Western painting down to Impressionism. Yet neither Giorgione nor Titian—nor any other Italian artist, though Correggio and Federico Barocci came closest—ever equaled Bellini's ability to suggest the miraculous in the everyday, and the divine harmony that he seems to have believed pervades all creation. Here, indeed, is painting that reveals "facts transfigured through love." ◆

Jump Soul

. . . spirit like an aviary in one of the old zoos—
nets, gym-high ceiling—when an off-handed clap, scutter—
some disturbance—comes and the birds
fly wildly. No way to calm them down, no keeper's close attendance,
lights, jungle music, tame twittering of paddock avionics,

only the patternless mad fling of bodies and the engendered memory—
not even memory: only blood spat into the brain—
of vast green tracts and courtly practice, fig trees
filled with purple fruit, birdlings, cuties,
no goshawks in sight, the broad, banded, unbuckled sky
and coherent sunshine luffing calmly, not for them.

CHARLIE SMITH

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Richard A. Posner
SHORTING REASON

ANIMAL SPIRITS: HOW HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY DRIVES THE ECONOMY, AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR GLOBAL CAPITALISM
By George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller
(Princeton University Press, 264 pp., $24.95)

The economics profession has been greatly embarrassed by the economic crisis. The crisis began last September, with the crash of the banking industry (broadly defined, as it should be in this deregulatory era, to include investment banks and other financial intermediaries besides commercial banks), and of the stock market and other financial markets. It has since grown into the first depression since the 1930s, if one may judge from its global sweep, the pervasive anxiety that it has engendered among government officials as well as the business community and the public at large, and the trillions of dollars that nations have desperately committed to fighting it. The economists had assured us that there would never be another depression in the United States, because economics had discovered how to prevent depressions: if economic activity dropped, the Federal Reserve had only to push down interest rates, for this would induce banks to lend and consumers and businessmen to borrow, and the borrowed money would be used to finance consumption and production, restoring output to its level before the crash. Academic and government economists specializing in the business cycle were as surprised by the September collapse and the ensuing downward spiral of the economy as anyone, and were unprepared with plans for arresting it. Six months later they cannot agree on what should be done to recover from it. Not knowing what will work, the government is trying everything.

The idea that monetary policy—raising interest rates (and therefore reducing the amount of money in circulation, because interest is the price of putting money into circulation rather than hoarding it) to check inflation, and lowering interest rates to check economic downturns—holds the key to moderating the business cycle, and therefore to preventing depressions as well as inflations, has been falsified. The Federal Reserve has pushed interest rates way down, but the amount of lending has been tepid and economic activity has continued to fall—hence the bailouts of banks and other financial institutions and the $787 billion stimulus package recently enacted by Congress. The stimulus, a program of deficit spending, seeks to replace the loss of private demand, and the resulting decline in economic activity, brought about by the economic crisis. It seeks to do this by public works, such as the construction and repair of highways and other transportation infrastructure, designed to increase employment, and by tax cuts and welfare payments, which are intended to increase incomes directly and by doing so to stimulate spending.

In 1936, John Maynard Keynes argued in his great book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* that government could use deficit spending to replace private demand with public demand, and by doing so put a nation's unemployed to work. Over time, this position has encountered increasing opposition. Many influential economists came to oppose deficit spending on public projects, which injects the government deep into the economy and creates a risk of inflation and high taxes in the future. Increasingly economists favored the monetarist approach, championed most famously by Milton Friedman, which teaches that the proper management of the money supply is all that is needed to avert depressions, and that it can do so painlessly.

But now that monetarism has received a sharp blow to its solar plexus, much of the economics profession has thrown its support to the idea of a fiscal stimulus (while rightly critical of many of the details of the stimulus package enacted by Congress). Which is to say, it has thrown its support to Keynesianism. In *Animal Spirits*, two distinguished liberal economists, reflecting on the current depression, marry Keynes to "behavioral economics" and offer the resulting union as a replacement for conventional monetarist economics, and for rational-choice theory more broadly.

George A. Akerlof's and Robert Shiller's book is short, and aimed at the general reader (though the end notes and bibliography are strictly for economists), but it is intended to be taken seriously as a work of economic theory. Akerlof is an expert on frictions in consumer and employment markets. Shiller is an expert on speculative excesses, and he was one of the few economists to warn about the danger of the housing bubble that brought the economy low.

Their thesis is that the key to understanding depressions, and the ups and downs of the economy more generally, is psychology, which they call "animal spirits." They relate this emphasis on psychology to the new field of economics called "behavioral economics," which rejects the "rational man" model of conventional economic theory in favor of what its proponents consider a more realistic picture of human motivations and capacities. Akerlof and Shiller believe that if people were rational, there would be no depressions; but there are depressions, and so the rational model must be inadequate.

They want a pedigree, or a sacred text, to lend authority to their thesis, and they want to champion the liberal Keynes over the conservative Friedman. Hence their appropriation of the term "animal spirits" from a famous passage in *The General Theory*: "Most, probably, of our decisions to do something positive, the full consequences of which will be drawn out over many days to come, can only be taken as a result of animal spirits—of a spontaneous urge to action rather than inaction, and not as the outcome of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities.... Thus if the animal spirits are dimmed and the spontaneous optimism fades, enterprise will fade and die.... It is our innate urge to activity which makes the wheels go round, our rational selves choosing between the alternatives as best we are able, calculating where we can, but often falling back for our motive on whim or sentiment or chance."

Akerlof and Shiller think that by "animal spirits" Keynes meant "noneconomic motives and irrational behaviors," and they imply that he wanted government to "countervail the excesses that occur because of our animal spirits." This is a misreading. The passage in *The General Theory* is not about excesses, and it does not argue that "animal spirits" should be damped down. It is about the danger of paralysis in the face of uncertainty ("if the animal spirits are dimmed and the spontaneous optimism fades, enterprise will fade and die"). As Keynes's biographer

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Robert Skidelsky explains, *The General Theory* argues that "actual output is normally below 'potential' output; in depressions disastrously so. It is only in moments of 'excitement' that the economic machine works at full blast. This helps explain why economic progress has been so slow and fitful."

Keynes picked up from the American economist Frank Knight the distinction between calculable risk, the sort of thing on which insurance premiums are based, and uncertainty in the sense of a risk that cannot be quantified. (Keynes had published a treatise on probability theory in 1921.) The fact that businessmen would venture to invest at all in the face of uncertainty was a puzzle, and the explanation, Keynes argued, lay in emotion. You would have to be high-spirited—say, like Columbus—to embark on a costly, uncertain venture. In other words: nothing ventured, nothing gained.

What happens in a depression, and makes it a psychological event as well as an economic and political one, is that the economic environment becomes *so* uncertain that people freeze. Not only are businessmen afraid to invest, but consumers are afraid to spend; instead they hoard cash. Right now our banks, dubiously solvent and harassed by an angry Congress, are hoarding. Consumers are hoarding, too; the savings rate has shot up, and the increased savings are taking safe and rather inert forms—CDs, money market accounts, government securities, even currency and gold—that do not stimulate investment. Until animal spirits revive, the economy will not recover.

Keynes thought that if government put the unemployed to work, their animal spirits would rise, along with those of the contractors who hired the unemployed to perform the government's contracts. Even more important, people who were still employed but afraid they would soon be unemployed would regain confidence if unemployment fell and the threat to their own jobs thus receded. Feeling more confident about their future, they would begin to spend, and business would begin to invest. The vicious cycle of falling consumption, production, and employment would turn into a virtuous cycle of rising consumption, production, and employment. Keynes worried about stock market speculation, because he thought that speculators based their decisions on guesses about the psychology of other investors rather than on which companies had the best prospects and therefore should attract new investment. But he did not relate speculation to an excess of animal spirits.

Akerlof and Shiller believe that the key to understanding depressions lies in motives or behaviors that they regard as non-rational or irrational. They list "confidence," "fairness," "money illusion," the temptation to "corruption," and susceptibility to "stories" and treat all of these as manifestations of "animal spirits." Only "confidence" comes within shouting distance of Keynes's understanding of animal spirits. But Akerlof and Shiller give it a negative charge that is alien to Keynes.

People buy common stock when stock prices are rising. They (notoriously) bought houses during the early 2000s when house prices were rising. Since almost no one can predict the ups and downs of the stock market or the housing market, these purchases must have been motivated, Akerlof and Shiller argue, by something other than a rational investment strategy. But this is not at all obvious, or implied by Keynes's usage. Stocks have generally been a good investment, at least when held for a considerable period. And since no one is able to time market turns, no one knows when the market is overpriced and therefore when one should sell rather than buy. Indeed, the idea of selling at the "top" of the market is incoherent, because if it were known that stock prices had peaked, no one would buy. Buying stock, or buying a house, is at any time a guess about the future, a venture into the unknown. Yet that does not imply irrationality.

In the early 2000s, interest rates were very low because of a mistaken decision by Alan Greenspan (but who knew?); and since a house is a product purchased with debt (a mortgage), houses became a more than usually attractive investment. The housing stock expands only slowly because it is so durable, so the increase in demand for houses outran the increase in supply (new housing starts), causing prices to rise. Since very few economists and no government officials warned of a bubble, it was not irrational for people to think that houses were a good investment, even though house prices had risen steeply since the 1990s.

They were wrong. But mistakes and ignorance are not symptoms of irrationality. They usually are the result of limited information. Ben Bernanke, in October 2005, just before the housing bubble began to leak air, denied that the rise in housing prices was a bubble. Was he irrational? That the errors of experts can lead to disaster is hardly a novelty, but it does not follow that only an irrational person would heed the advice of experts.

Akerlof and Shiller rightly associate booms with "new era" thinking, but wrongly deem such thinking irrational. Stocks soared in the late 1920s because it was a period of rapid economic growth based on rapidly rising labor productivity and new products such as the mass-produced automobile, new methods of retailing such as the chain store, and new methods of finance such as installment buying and the purchase of common stock on margin. There was no reason to think that existing stock prices reflected an exaggerated expectation of increased wealth in so dynamic an era. The late 1990s were likewise heralded as a new era, this time on the basis of expectations that the computer would transform the economy. The early 2000s seemed to most people still another new era, this one based on the seemingly magical conjunction of low interest rates with low inflation, rising asset values, and new financial instruments that were believed to enable greater lending and borrowing with less risk. In all three cases the new era turned out, at least in the short run, to be a false dawn, and an asset-price crash ensued. Given the uncertainty of the economic environment, stressed by Keynes, such disappointments are not surprising, and they do not show that investors are irrational.

Nor are booms the result, as Akerlof and Shiller curiously argue, of "corruption scandals." They think that economic downturns are preceded by increases in corruption, and they give examples. The oddest is the widespread violation of the prohibition laws in the 1920s, but they also note the financial scandals exposed by investigations of Wall Street that Congress conducted in the ensuing depression. They think that mortgage fraud was a major cause of the present crisis. How all this relates to animal spirits is unclear, but in any event they are wrong about the causality. Warren Buffett had it right: until the tide goes out, you cannot know who is swimming naked. A crash exposes frauds; it is rarely caused by them. Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme fell apart

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when, as a consequence of the stock market crash last fall, his investors—their wealth diminished and their animal spirits crushed—tried to withdraw money from his phony hedge fund. The scheme itself was not a cause of the crash.

There was more than the usual amount of mortgage fraud during the housing bubble, but it was not the cause of many millions of people overpaying for houses, as we know with the benefit of hindsight that they did. Cheap credit and soaring house values were the immediate causes of the bubble and of all that followed when it burst. The underlying causes were the deregulation of financial services; lax enforcement of the remaining regulations; unsound decisions on interest rates by the Federal Reserve; huge budget deficits; the globalization of the finance industry; the financial rewards of risky lending, and competitive pressures to engage in it, in the absence of effective regulation; the overconfidence of economists inside and outside government; and the government's erratic, confidence-destroying improvisational responses to the banking collapse.

Some of these mistakes of commission and omission had emotional components. The overconfidence of economists might even be thought a manifestation of animal spirits. But the career and reward structures, and the ideological preconceptions, of macroeconomists are likelier explanations than emotion for the economics profession's failure to foresee or respond effectively to the crisis.

That animal spirits droop in a bust is no more anomalous than that they soar in a boom. To freeze and to hoard is a perfectly sensible reaction to an increase in economic uncertainty, whether one is a businessman or a consumer. It is individually rational behavior, though bad for the economy. Rich women think they are helping the economy by cutting down on luxury purchases; they are merely increasing unemployment in retailing.

While for Keynes "confidence" (or "animal spirits") was the key to getting out of a depression, for Akerlof and Shiller it is something to be chilled down in order to prevent booms that might turn into busts. This inversion of Keynes may explain the strangest statement in the book: that "both presidents are heroes of ours," the two presidents being Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt. Both are "heroes" because both ran budget deficits and created new agencies to regulate the economy.

But there is a significant historical difference that Akerlof and Shiller overlook. In the three years of depression during which Hoover was president, confidence drained out of the economy. The depression touched bottom at the end of his term, and turned around within days of Roosevelt's inauguration. As Gauti Eggerstsson recently explained in the *American Economic Review*, Hoover's adherence to the gold standard, and his determination to keep government small (so no Keynesian stimulus) and raise taxes to try to balance the budget, created a rational expectation of continued economic contraction, dampening the economy's animal spirits. Roosevelt's decision, made promptly upon his taking office, to go off the gold standard (in effect), push up prices (in order to end deflation), and engage in massive (for the time) deficit spending, created an expectation of economic recovery. This expectation had positive effects on the economy even before the new policies could take effect. Roosevelt restored confidence, which Hoover had killed, and renewed confidence restarted the economic engine.

A weakness of Akerlof's and Shiller's book is a failure to define their target: the rational model of human behavior. If rationality means omniscience, then it is indeed an unsound premise for economic reasoning. If it means reasoning unaffected by emotion, then it misunderstands emotion. The word "emotional" has overtones of irrationality, but actually emotion is at once a form of telescoped thinking (it is not irrational to step around an open manhole "instinctively" without first analyzing the costs and benefits of falling into it) and a prompt to action that often, as in the case of investment under uncertainty, cannot be based on complete or even good information and is therefore unavoidably a shot in the dark. We could not survive if we were afraid to act in the face of uncertainty.

Irrationality is not the courage to act. Irrationality is to be found in the cognitive quirks that we owe to the human brain having evolved in a very different environment from our present one. We are poor at evaluating low-probability events because in the ancestral environment (as evolutionary biologists call it) there was little that could be done about such events. The sense of the irrational that merchants exploit—that a price of $5.99 is meaningfully less than $6.00—is a trace of the limited value in that environment of being able to evaluate fine differences. These quirks do not explain depressions.

As one reads this book, one has the sense that deep down Akerlof and Shiller believe that being rational is the same as being right. That is a mistake. It prevents them from entertaining the possibility that what has now plunged the world into depression is a cascade of mistakes by rational businessmen, government officials, academic economists, consumers, and homebuyers, operating in an unexpectedly fragile economic environment, and that what is retarding recovery is not the "unreasoning fear" of which Franklin Roosevelt famously spoke but the rational fears—the reasoning fear, to use Roosevelt's idiom—of businesspeople, consumers, and officials who confront economic uncertainties for which no one had prepared them.

Akerlof and Shiller invoke "fairness" and "money illusion" to explain the puzzling behavior of employment and wages in a depression. It may seem obvious that employment would fall in a depression. But it is not. If demand for a firm's products falls, the firm will have less revenue, and therefore it will have to cut its costs, including its labor costs, to survive. So why not just cut its workers' wages and explain to them why? If they stalk off in anger, the employer should have no difficulty in hiring replacements at the lower wage, for in the unsettled conditions of a depression it will be attractive to other workers. Or suppose, as often happens in a depression (and may still happen in our current one), the general price level falls. In a deflation, the same amount of money buys more, because prices are lower. So one might expect an employer to say to his employees, "Since the purchasing power of the dollar has risen, I am going to cut your wage, as otherwise, by receiving the same amount of money when its purchasing power has increased, you would be receiving a wage increase, which makes no sense in a depression." (Among the paradoxes of depression is that we *want* wages to fall, so that producers will have lower costs and will therefore produce more and so hire more workers. This is not understood by the politicians who are pushing for legal changes that will encourage unionization. They should wait until we are out of the woods.)

Wages do fall in a deflation, but not as far as prices; and employers do generally prefer to economize on labor costs by laying off workers rather than by reducing their wages. The resistance of workers to having their wages cut in a deflation, a resistance that in the Great Depression of the 1930s produced a sharp rise in real incomes for many workers while others were on breadlines, is ascribed by Akerlof and Shiller to workers' sense of "fairness"—of their sense of entitlement to their existing wage—and to "money il-

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lusion," by which they mean the failure to distinguish between the amount of money one receives as a wage (the nominal wage) and the purchasing power of the wage (the real wage). They also argue that employers deliberately "overpay" their workers in order to boost morale and loyalty. But this does not explain why nominal wages are not cut during a depression in order to maintain (not cut) real wages.

There is a simpler explanation for unemployment in depressions, one that dispenses with irrationality. A worker who, rather than being paid a flat wage, is paid a percentage of his firm's income would be unlikely to complain when his wage dropped in a depression; he would know that his wage was variable, and he would plan his life accordingly. But if paid a fixed wage, he is likely to count on it as a steady source of income. Since depressions are rare and have unpredictable consequences, he will not have been able to protect himself from the consequences of a depression-induced cut in his wage. He is going to be upset to find that he is working as hard or harder but being paid less, and he will not be reassured by being given a lecture on deflation and purchasing power, because he will not understand or believe it. And whereas wage cuts make the entire work force unhappy, layoffs make just the laid-off workers unhappy, and since they are no longer on the premises they do not demoralize the remaining work force by their unhappy presence. The employer, for this and other reasons—such as wanting to economize on benefits and overhead and induce the remaining workers to work harder lest they be laid off too—is likely to prefer laying off workers to cutting wages. (Unemployment insurance is a factor as well.)

This explanation for unemployment in depressions is consistent with Akerlof and Shiller in giving weight to cognitive and emotional factors (workers do not understand deflation, unhappy workers can demoralize the workplace), but it avoids jargon and condescension and the fascination with irrationality. Yet it may be too simple to please an academic economist. One reason why Keynes fell into disfavor among academic economists, and why Akerlof and Shiller want to dress him in the garb of a behavioral economist, is that although he was a brilliant economist and remains a hero of liberal economists, he was not a formal or systematic thinker. He belonged to the era before economists insisted on mathematizing the discipline. *The General Theory* is beautifully written—and full of loose ends and puzzling omissions. Keynes was a self-taught economist and a part-time academic. He had a rich and varied non-academic life as a government official and adviser, journalist, speculator, academic administrator, and member of the Cambridge Apostles and the Bloomsbury group. Having observed how people, including himself, behaved in the real world, he was unself-conscious about incorporating into economic theory such unsystematized and untheorized concepts as "animal spirits" (and its opposite, "liquidity preference"—the desire to hoard cash rather than spend or invest it).

The complexity of a modern economy has defeated efforts to create mathematical models that would enable depressions to be predicted and would provide guidance on how to prevent them or, failing that, to recover from them. The insights of behavioral economics have not done the trick, either. Shiller is to be commended for spotting bubbles, but few if any other behavioral economists noticed them; and he and Akerlof offer no concrete proposals for how we might recover from the current depression and prevent a future one. They want credit loosened, but so does everyone else—so did Keynes, who criticized our government for tightening credit in the early stages of the Great Depression.

We will discover soon enough whether the measures taken by the Obama administration are reviving the animal spirits of producers and consumers. The intentions are good. But the lack of focus, the partisan squabbling, the dizzying policy oscillations, the delays in execution, and the harassment of bankers are bad. By increasing the uncertainty of the business environment, these things are dampening the animal spirits—the courage to reason and act in the face of an uncertain future. Seventy-three years after the publication of *The General Theory*, it may still be our best guide to recovery from our present distress, not least because of its common-sense psychology.◆

Daniel Mendelsohn
THE COLLECTOR

REBORN:
JOURNALS & NOTEBOOKS 1947-1963
By Susan Sontag
Edited by David Rieff
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 318 pp., $24)

I.

It is somehow appropriate that the voice of deep and anguished ambivalence that you hear at the beginning of Susan Sontag's early journals and notebooks does not belong to Susan Sontag. Self-doubt, after all, was not a quality you generally associated with her. From the moment she burst onto the literary scene nearly fifty years ago, with the publication of the essays subsequently collected as *Against Interpretation*—a cultural-critical Athena, armored with a vast erudition, bristling with epigrams—Sontag exhibited a preternatural self-assurance in matters of art and culture, an unwavering belief in her own judgments and tastes that, as these early private papers now make clear, she possessed already in her early teens. (The first of a projected three volumes of Sontag's journals, this one takes her to the age of thirty; fully one-third of it is a record of her teenaged years.)

The embarrassment with which *Reborn* begins belongs, rather, to her son, the writer David Rieff, who edited his mother's journals. In a moving preface, Rieff describes how he uneasily consented to publish this "raw" and "unvarnished" sampling of Sontag's adolescent effusions about life and early perceptions about art. Throughout his short introduction he shows a marked queasiness about "the literary dangers and moral hazards of such an enterprise." The anxiety stems from two sources, of which the first was ethical and, so to speak, generic: although his mother, in one of her final illnesses, was anxious for him to know where the journals were kept, there was no indication that Sontag would have wanted the contents of these papers to be made public. "The diaries," Rieff notes, "were written solely for herself… She had never permitted a line from them to be published, nor, unlike some diarists, did she read from them to friends."

Rieff's second scruple, more personal and more revealing, suggests the reason for the first:

> To say that these diaries are self-revelatory is a drastic understatement.… One of the principal dilemmas in all

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> this has been that, at least in her later life, my mother was not in any way a self-revealing person. In particular, she avoided to the extent that she could, without denying it, any discussion of her own homosexuality or any acknowledgment of her own ambition.

Sex and ambition are, of course, the reason that many people read the private journals of public figures—all the more so in the case of deceased celebrities who went to some trouble to maintain the high polish of their public personae. In Sontag's case, the inevitable interest in the raw passions corresponding to "homosexuality" and "ambition" is bound to be strong, because Sontag's persona seemed designed to quash interest in precisely those two things. On the one hand, there was the famous reticence about her lesbianism, despite the fact that it was, as she awkwardly admitted late in life, an "open secret." On the other, there was the cool Artemis-like glamour (that silver streak), the sense she projected of being a high priestess of high culture—a sense heightened by her penchant for gnomic utterances: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art"; "New York: all sensuality is converted to sexuality"; and so on. All of this conferred upon her an aura of intellectual invulnerability, of an authority that, rather than having been earned, or having evolved, she somehow had always possessed complete.

It is unlikely that the strangely scattered document that has resulted from Rieff's editing will satisfy readers motivated by prurience. (This volume has a jittery, disjointed feel, and it is not clear whether this is how the journals were written or if the published version of them was shaped to accord with Sontag's trademarked aphoristic style.) What's fascinating—and, in the end, deeply revealing—is that the journal reveals an adolescent and, later, a young woman, in whom "ambition"—in this case, an overpowering yearning to be surrounded by and immersed in literature and culture—vastly outweighed, and seems ultimately to have overpowered, "sexuality." That disproportion explains a great deal about the strange career—its achievements and its failures—of a writer who, as her son wrenchingly writes, "was as uncomfortable with her body as she was serene about her mind." Or for whom, as she herself puts it in the last entry of this journal, "intellectual wanting" was the equal of "sexual wanting."

The erotic element about which David Rieff worries in his preface is, indeed, the least memorable part of Sontag's private writings, at least in this first volume. There is, to be sure, a good deal of emoting, particularly in the early entries, which are dominated by the usual sorts of adolescent anxieties. "How easy it would be to convince myself of the plausibility of my parents' life!" she writes in 1947, at the age of fourteen, already showing the impatience with the petit-bourgeois assimilated Jewish-American background into which she was born, and at which she would never look back—the impatience that would later drive her to Berkeley, then to the University of Chicago, and then to New York, where she lived for the rest of her life. "I am in love with being in love!" she writes the next year, in one of the many girlish effusions about her already precocious erotic life that are sprinkled through the journals. (She understood that she was a lesbian very early on, and started having serious affairs as a teenager.)

Much of the material about the diarist's sentimental life constitutes a fairly typical *Bildungsgeschichte*, the record of a young person's initiation into the mysteries of adulthood. The only real surprise here is that, intriguingly for a woman of her class, culture (provincial: she grew up in Arizona), and era (she was born in 1933), Sontag did not express a great deal of anguish about homosexuality itself. The pain that she records in these pages is the pain that comes with any love affair—this journal chronicles two major lesbian relationships—but the insights are no more illuminating, finally, than the confidences to be found in any number of such documents, straight or gay. ("Lesson: not to surrender one's heart when it's not wanted.") This is true, too, I think, of the more explicit ruminations about sex itself, which are both infrequent and wholly conventional. ("Fucking vs. being fucked. The deeper experience—more gone—is being fucked.")

What you do want—what would, perhaps, be illuminating about Sontag's hitherto hidden emotional life—you don't get, at least in the text that has been published. There is almost no comment whatsoever on a notorious enigma of Sontag's early biography: her engagement, at the age of sixteen, to the sociologist Philip Rieff after a ten-day acquaintance—a decision about which this journal's near-total silence may, in the end, be more eloquent than words. As for the aftermath of that bizarre decision, there is much here about a bad marriage that, *pace* Tolstoy, seems to have been a lot like many other bad marriages, although Sontag can bring to her account of its collapse the same crisp intelligence that would make her criticism so satisfying. "Whoever invented marriage was an ingenious tormentor," she wrote in 1956, after nine years with Rieff. "It is an institution *committed* to the dulling of feelings. The whole point of marriage is repetition. The best it aims for is the creation of strong, mutual dependencies." She left Rieff in 1957.

So the sex is not that good. That leaves the ambition. That Sontag—the critic who emerged in the early 1960s as a Wildean champion of style wherever it could be found (camp, Godard, theater, "happenings," science fiction movies, pornography), only to evolve, as a literary critic, in her middle and later years, into a tireless champion of a great number of (often neglected or overlooked) male European novelists—was completely omnivorous and always hungry for something new was something you understood from the work itself. What the early journals reveal, and what ends up being far more moving than the material that is ostensibly about her emotional life, is the intensity and the scope of a remarkable intellectual ambition that was present from the start: the astonishing avidity for culture, for aesthetic stimulation, that more than anything mark Sontag as a writer and a public figure. (Members of a certain generation of writers can invariably recall the play, or opera, or ballet, or opening, or reading at which they first saw Sontag: she seemed to be everywhere.) At the age of fifteen she already had an unwavering conviction of what she wanted to do and where she needed to be: "I want to write—I want to live in an intellectual atmosphere.... I want to live in a cultural center." And then, later: "I intend to do everything."

Much of *Reborn*—and, according to Rieff's occasional interpolated commentaries, a great deal more of the original documents—consists simply of lists of, well, "everything": books that the voracious Sontag was determined to read, movies she had to see, poets and playwrights she had to know. An entry from 1948, when she was fifteen, looks like this:

Gide
Sherwood Anderson
Ludwig Lewisohn
Faulkner
George Moore
Dostoyevsky
Huysmans
Bourget
Arsybashev

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Trumbo
Galsworthy
Meredith

poems of Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Tibullus, Heine, Pushkin, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Apollinaire

plays of Synge, O'Neill, Calderón, Shaw, Hellman

In an italicized note to this passage, Rieff indicates that the list goes on for another five pages in the original.

As the years pass and the journal continues, this particular passion, at least, never abates. What strikes you is how you encounter less and less the kind of emotions most people confide to their diaries—tenderness, vulnerability, and so on. A list that is genuinely affecting, because it gives a rare glimpse of that kind of awkward vulnerability, is the one that the young woman drew up before her first trip to Paris in 1957, which reveals how nervously the already deeply francophile writer studied for her transatlantic debut:

café crème—white coffee after dinner
café au lait—breakfast coffee
une fine (brandy)
un Pernod (as many Pernods as colas in the U.S.)

But the outsized cultural avidity, the literary ambition to which these pages bear witness, seems eventually to have occluded the more tender feelings. (Not the least of these was the maternal. It cannot have been easy for Rieff to come across lines such as these: "I hardly ever dream of David, and don't think of him much. He has made few inroads on my fantasy-life." Most editors are not called upon for, and do not demonstrate, such probity.)

Indeed, there is a strange, sometimes even shocking *froideur* in evidence here about subjects that most of us find hot: it is startling to grasp the extent to which Sontag brought to her own life the chilly assessing gaze that made her such a brilliant critic, such an expert looker. There is a remarkable passage toward the end of the book—she is in her late twenties—in which she considers that "sex as a cognitive act would be, practically, a helpful attitude for me to have, to keep my eyes open, my head up—where the point is *not* to show sexual excitement as long as you can. (No pelvic spasms, no hard breathing, no words, etc.)" "Practical" and "helpful" do not, for most of us, belong to the linguistic register that we bring to our understanding of a roll in the hay. And later on Sontag again returns to this wish "to make sex cognitive"—and "to correct the imbalance now."

But it is not at all clear that the balancing act was a great success. This journal reveals a person for whom, however much she saw herself as a sensualist, the cognitive and the analytical invariably dominated the erotic and the affective. ("Emotionally, I wanted to stay," Sontag wrote of her decision to leave home and family in Los Angeles for Berkeley. "Intellectually, I wanted to leave." She left.) The inevitable triumph of the head over the heart in these pages defies, I think, a description of his mother that Rieff gives in his preface. In speaking of Sontag's extraordinary literary ambition, he compares her to Balzac's Lucien de Rubempré, the hero of *Lost Illusions*, the talented youth who comes from the provinces to find literary fame in Paris: a comparison that concludes with his summary explanation of Sontag as a "nineteenth-century consciousness." It is a judgment, you suspect, with which Sontag, with her insatiable avidity for experience and her penchant for the Continental novel as model of the highest form of literary activity, would have concurred.

And yet when you survey her career with an eye as coolly dispassionate as the one she trained on so many objects, it becomes obvious that, temperamentally, she belonged to another century entirely. Her failure to understand just which century it was accounts for the sense you often get, taking the work as a whole, of aspirations that were at odds with her temperament and her talent; and it explains a great deal about both the strengths and the weaknesses of her work, and also the strange fascination that she exerted.

II.

This uneasy and riven quality, the impression of an identity not quite resolved, animates and often troubles so much about her writing, and also her public activity: the criticism, the fiction, and the politics.

If you looked closely enough, this quality was there from the start, in the breathtakingly authoritative critical pieces with which she made her reputation in the early 1960s, but—as would often happen with this remarkable personality—the sheer force and stylishness of her utterances overwhelmed whatever doubts there might have been. The essays in *Against Interpretation* (1961) and in *Styles of Radical Will* (1966) may champion, famously, the need not for "a hermeneutics but an erotics of Art," but what is so striking is that there is not anything very erotic about these essays; they are, in fact, all hermeneutics. In the criticism, as in the journals, the eros is all from the neck up.

The heat, if anything, tended to be in the objects of Sontag's interest. The early forays into cultural criticism often derive their power precisely from the tension between the iciness of Sontag's Olympian gaze and the unexpectedly funky, roiling, popular objects at which she levels it: porn, movies, sci-fi, camp. There was a deep pleasure, a thrill even, in seeing how she used a formidably broad and deep learning, and the traditional tools of formal literary analysis, to turn cultural sows' ears into critical silk purses. In demonstrating the deeper cultural significance of phenomena that nobody else had thought to take seriously ("camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture … camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica"), she anticipated by a generation the belated adolescence of the American academy—all those Comp Lit and Cultural Studies dissertations, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, on Madonna and Boy George. This willingness to see the value in material disdained by "high" culture—something for which Pauline Kael would later become famous, after Sontag's position shifted—was an important and satisfying part of Sontag's rhetorical persona, and went a long way toward giving her the iconoclastic allure that would cling to her for the rest of her life, however conservative her tastes were to become.

And yet this astoundingly gifted interpreter, so naturally skilled at peeling away trivial-seeming exteriors to reveal deeper cultural meanings—or at teasing out the underlying significance of surface features to which you might not have given much attention ("people run beautifully in Godard movies")—fought mightily to affect an "aesthetic" disdain for content. Again and again, the essays themselves give the lie to her agenda of devaluing interpretation: even as she appears to swoon over "the untranslatable, sensuous immediacy" of, say, *Last Year in Marienbad*, you can't help noticing that there is not a single sensuous surface that she does not try to translate into something abstract and rarefied, that is not subject to the flashing scalpel of her critical intellect. While this championing of form and especially "style" at the expense of content and "meaning" is, of course, hardly original—it is reheated Wilde—what is so striking is the insistence that it be true: the writer's desperate need to believe the rhetorical claim that her own writing subverts.

There is, if anything, an odd quality of protesting too much to these gestures,

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to the booming opening salvos against contemporary intellectual culture's "hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability," and of interpretation as "the revenge of the intellect upon art." As you make your way through these exercises in interpretative finesse, with their flourishes of epigrammatic bravura ("the greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality"), you wonder who is taking revenge on whom, exactly. Here again you feel the presence of an underlying conflict: Sontag the natural analyst against Sontag the struggling sensualist. I do not doubt that she genuinely wished to experience works of art purely with the senses and the emotions, but the author of these celebrated essays is quite plainly the grown-up version of the young girl who, at fifteen, declared her preference for "virtuosity … technique, organization … the cruelly realistic comment (Huxley, Rochefoucauld), the mocking caricature." Technique, virtuosity, raillery, cruelty even: all this, capped by the reference to Rochefoucauld, reminds you that, whatever her Balzacian yearnings, Sontag's young tastes were far more in line with French classicism than with Romantic passion.

If the criticism is marked by a struggle between Sontag the analyst and Sontag the aspiring sensualist, the fiction is marked by a struggle between Sontag the critic and Sontag the aspiring novelist. Everything that makes her an extraordinary critic—the extreme analytical self-consciousness, the way in which she cannot help but train the cool and assessing eye on every available object, the thirst for learning all the relevant and arcane details, the inability to resist any opportunity to interpret and to explain—makes her an inept novelist. There is a jarring contrast between the thrilling vividness of her critical writing and the almost total inertness of her fiction. With a curious unwillingness to acknowledge her actual strengths and her actual limitations, she clung stubbornly to a view of herself as essentially a writer of novels and stories, from her claim in the preface to *Against Interpretation* that her critical essays were largely ancillary to her fiction, helping her to "radically change" her "conception of [her] task as a novelist," to her pronouncement, in a speech she gave on accepting a prize in Germany in 2003, that "I am a storyteller."

But if her fiction demonstrates anything—from the strained exercise in francophilia that was *The Benefactor* in 1963, replete with the kind of archness and striving for effect that so often result when critics aspire to fiction ("he always spoke across the unbesiegeable moat of his own chastity") to *The Volcano Lover*, in 1992, and *In America*, in 2000—it was that Sontag did not possess the novelist's basic impulse, which is the urge to tell a story. In all of her novels, the critic's analytical and self-examining eye dominates, explaining too much, getting in the way. In both *The Volcano Lover*, a kind of intellectual recasting of *That Hamilton Woman*, and *In America*, a highly self-referential fictionalization of the career of the nineteenth-century Polish actress Helen Modjeska, Sontag herself, in the form of a disembodied narrator's voice, hovers intrusively over the story that she claims to want to tell, commenting on the action, distracting your attention from the story by reminding us that this is a Susan Sontag production. "Appalled by the lethal upsurge of nationalist and tribal feelings in my own time," the narrator of *In America* says, apropos of some ruminations about her Polish characters' national history, "I'd spent a good part of three years in besieged Sarajevo." There is no aesthetic reason, nothing in the form or the narrative, for the reader to have this information. Sontag just can't get out of the way. You suspect that this arch carrying on was meant to be justified as a playful, even chicly post-modern device, but Sontag was too solemn and self-serious a writer to get away with such tricks, and the intrusions come off as merely pretentious.

The way that Sontag's fiction keeps stumbling over Sontag herself reminds you of the extent to which she is really a critic—criticism being an enterprise in which the presence of the writer is one that you want and need. But the Sontag that the author of the later fiction seems to think we want is not even Sontag the great critic: it is just "Sontag," the celebrated public figure. Already in *The Volcano Lover*, but particularly in the unbearably labored and self-conscious *In America*, the authorial interventions feel not only self-referential but also self-congratulatory. Even the true believers who felt that *In America* deserved its acclaim must have stumbled over passages such as the following one, in which, as the novel opens, the hovering Sontag-narrator explains how she manages to understand the conversation of the Polish characters she mysteriously finds herself observing at the beginning of her tale:

> But I, with my command only of Romance languages (I dabble in German, know the names of twenty kinds of fish in Japanese, have soaked up a splash of Bosnian, and understand barely a word of the language of the country in which this room is to be found), I, as I've said, somehow did manage to understand most of what they were saying.

The command "only" of Romance languages; the pompous advertisement for what we understand to be her sophisticated appreciation of sushi and sashimi—stuff like this, and there is a lot of it, makes you wish that Sontag had hoped for herself what, as the narrator of *In America*, she "hoped" for her protagonist: that "she hadn't been made less of an artist by high-mindedness. Or by self-regard."

Such vanities abound in Sontag's fiction, and suggest that, all her superb literary acumen notwithstanding, she was, as a writer, astoundingly un-self-aware. Her apparent conviction, derived from her early immersion in nineteenth-century European literature, that to be a significant literary figure you had to be a novelist, paradoxically blinded her to what already made her a significant literary figure. There is a passage in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a slender critical work published in 2003, in which, making a case about the special rhetorical quality of photography, she observes that "photographs [are] both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality—a feat literature has long aspired to, but could never attain in this literal sense." But of course literature does possess a genre that strives to be both objective and personal, an accurate record and a subjective testimony, a representation and an interpretation at the same time, and it is the genre at which Sontag truly excelled: the genre of criticism. That she could write such a passage—that it never occurred to her to think of her own métier when thinking about what literature could do—is more wrenching than anything she ever wrote in her fiction.

III.

The contrast between the pointed effectiveness and verbal élan of Sontag's critical writing and the bloated grandiosities of Sontag's fiction makes it that much more regrettable that, as time passed, the criticism itself seemed to metamorphose, to change direction and tone. It was a shift that profoundly altered both what she wrote and how she could be read.

Like Wilde, whose arguments and aphoristic dazzle she appropriated, Sontag achieved considerable fame and authority early on by rebelling against staid, academic, old-fashioned intellectual cul-

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ture. And like Wilde, she paradoxically used the tools provided by a formidable traditional education (he as a classicist, she as a student of philosophy and a precocious autodidact) to reject the academy, instead carving out a career for herself as a popular literary figure—a move that surely accounts for the cult-like status that she, like Wilde, enjoyed: both were intellectuals who made good, who achieved glamour in the great world. And yet, once she had made her name with those extraordinarily cunning and excitingly fresh validations of popular American culture, Sontag went on to spend the rest of her career as a tireless cheerleader for the canon, for what she referred to, with telling frequency, as "greatness"—a quality that, strikingly, she seemed increasingly to find only in the works of middle-aged, white, European men.

This is most apparent in the later essays, such as those collected in 2001 in *Where The Stress Falls*, pieces written in the years after the last of her significant works of cultural criticism, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*—texts in which Sontag brilliantly brings a calm philological eye to reveal the cultural anxieties and prejudices that lay beneath the overwrought diction of pop epidemiology and professional medicine. The problem with *Where the Stress Falls* is, in fact, that there is not a whole lot of stress in evidence. There is a played-out feel about the book, whose serious critical reflections are increasingly rambling and diffuse, and whose many incidental pieces seem, more than anything, like advertisements for Sontag's status as a cultural icon: answers to French questionnaires about the role of intellectuals, for example, and self-flattering ruminations on being translated. ("You might say I'm obsessed with translations. I think I'm just obsessed with language.")

This exhaustion is more marked in the posthumous collection—Sontag died in 2004—called *At the Same Time*, which includes the now-notorious speech in which she seems to have plagiarized her observations about hypertext: the ultimate mark of creative exhaustion. But a critical tendency does emerge. The vast majority of these late and ostensibly critical pieces are encomia to (and sometimes eulogies for) a long list of European (preferably *Mittel*) men: Victor Serge, W. G. Sebald, Robert Walser, Danilo Kis, Joseph Brodsky, Witold Gombrowicz, Adam Zagajewski. These essays are curiously shorter and more desultory than the early pieces; there is a restless quality even to the project of praise, which Sontag very early on saw as her specialty. ("I don't, ultimately, care for handing out grades to works of art," she wrote in a later preface to *Against Interpretation*. "I wrote as an enthusiast and a partisan.") Walser, for whom she professes to want to perform her signal service and thereby "bring [him] to the attention of a public that has not yet discovered him," gets a scant two pages, which end with the kind of banal encomium, a blurb really, that you expect from the harried reviewers in the dailies: "a truly wonderful writer."

Compare all this to the forty-two densely packed pages of her thrillingly brilliant dissection of Godard in 1968, for whose reputation she set out to perform a similar service. In that instance Sontag was providing a rigorous and wholly original way of thinking about the complex work of a major young contemporary artist; it was an essay that felt like part of something vital that was happening in the arts. In the Walser piece, by contrast, you get a whiff of Lemon Pledge: she's dusting off a forgotten tchotchke and putting it back on the very high shelf from which it had fallen. The style, too, is diminished, wearied. The surgical gleam and "aphoristic glitter"—Sontag's admiring description of Glenway Wescott's style in *The Pilgrim Hawk*—of the strong youthful pieces comes more and more to be replaced here by expressions of anxious concern for the safety of High Culture. "Is literary greatness still possible?" she frets in the slim essay on Sebald.

All this suggests, in the end, a certain melancholy fulfillment of a prophecy that Sontag made in her journals when she was in her early twenties. Not long before her twenty-fourth birthday, she wondered to herself which of two roads she might take, and the question suggests that she understood more, then, about the divided nature of both her gifts and her ambitions—the struggle, not least, between genuine innovation and intelligent adulation—than some of her later pronouncements, and projects, might indicate. The answer, too, was prescient. "To philosophize, or to be a culture-conserver?," she wondered in October, 1956. "I had never thought of being anything other than the latter."

Anyway, what had "greatness" come to mean for Sontag? It was, for a start, almost exclusively identified with Europe. In his preface Rieff acknowledges that for his mother "American literature was a suburb of the great literatures of Europe," and he is right: Sontag devoted none of her remarkable interpretative energies to significant American writers, either of an earlier time or of her own. The most effusive of her literary encomia, indeed, often come at the expense of the Anglo-American tradition. "When has one heard in English a voice of such confidence and precision, so direct in its expression of feeling, yet so respectfully devoted to recording 'the real?,'" she asks in her piece on Sebald, the last in the string of German novelists whom she exalted, an adulation that started with Thomas Mann and her life-altering reading of *The Magic Mountain* as a teenager. (In *Reborn* Sontag records her meeting with Mann when she was fourteen and he seventy-two, and both were living in Los Angeles; rather typically, she expresses disappointment that the flesh and blood person failed to live up to the books.) And, as the list of writers whom Sontag does choose to exalt in collections such as *Where the Stress Falls* also suggests, "greatness" seems to be largely the property of men, and is most likely to be achieved through the writing of novels. And so, in the end, Sontag became a genuine traditionalist—not only a conserver but also, at least in matters of culture, a conservative.

This desire to be associated with "greatness" of a kind that is, when all is said and done, exceedingly old-fashioned, brings you back to the Sontag of the early journals—to the "ambition," to the starry-eyed lover of books who reminds Rieff of Lucien de Rubempré. Lucien's real name is the comically plebeian Chardon, or "thistle": he has to shake the family tree a bit before the name that he eventually adopts, with its glamorous aristocratic "de," falls out. The desire not merely for self-transformation, but for a kind of validation that only an association with the highest echelons of culture can bring, is one to which *Reborn* bears ample witness. As his name change indicates, Lucien's aspirations were social as well as artistic; whereas Sontag, to her great credit, was purely intellectual and cultural in her ambitions. "I want to live in an intellectual atmosphere, I want to live in a cultural center," she had written. Her desire, twice articulated in these pages, to be "reborn" itself testifies to a the fervor of her belief that it was necessary to abandon where she came from in order to get where she wanted to be—an impetus that may well never have found an end point, and that itself may have seemed to her a mark of "greatness."

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But the obsession with "greatness" also has other implications. There is, you realize, something odd about the list of qualities that Sontag associated with literary greatness: it is a list of things that Sontag was not. The sense you get here of a profoundly divided identity is, for Rieff, entirely consonant with his mother's taste for transformation, the lifelong effort to "remake herself": anticipating the questions about self-knowledge and identity that such efforts inevitably raise about people, he suggests that what in other people could be seen as a discomfort, a kind of covering up, was in Sontag's case exemplary. He casts her strenuous "jettisoning" of her middle-class, American, Jewish roots ("her social and ethnic context," as he puts it) as a heroic nineteenth-century, and even somewhat Nietzschean, affair—the achievement of a titanic "will." He cites Fitzgerald on second acts in American lives, nicely suggesting that Sontag's increasing dissociation from things American was the most American thing about her.

But it is difficult not to ascribe this pervasive irresolution and this desperate desire for transformation also to another factor, to the other of the two strands that unspool in *Reborn*—not to ambition, but to sexuality. In this case, the instability had a marked effect on Sontag's engagement with politics. I am referring to the issue of Sontag's homosexuality, which she discussed forthrightly enough in her private musings, but about which she remained curiously reticent even when such reticence was no longer expected of important left-wing intellectuals—indeed, when to come out of the closet would have been an affirmation of a certain kind of cultural bona fides. It is a measure of the intimidating power of Sontag's mystique that comparatively little has been made over the years of the refusal by Sontag, the most public of public intellectuals, to engage—in her speeches and her essays—with the pressing issues raised particularly by the AIDS crisis and the political and cultural controversies that it generated throughout the 1980s and 1990s. (It says something that when Sontag did write about homosexuality, it was a fiction: the now-famous short story "The Way We Live Now," first published in *The New Yorker* in November, 1986. It is a story about men, about male homosexuals and their experience: a suggestive displacement.)

If anything, the notion that she might have connected the dots between her sexual nature and her public utterances on power and justice tended to be cast as a vulgar parochialization, a crass infringement upon her citizenship in the wider republic of letters. Rieff writes that his mother "avoided to the extent that she could, without denying it, any discussion of her own homosexuality." Much depends on that "without denying it." Sontag's passivity in this regard may have been the only feeble thing about her; she was, after all, no stranger to controversy. She herself was almost touchingly forthright about her ambiguity, in remarks she made late in life to the editor of *OUT* magazine:

> I grew up in a time when the modus operandi was the "open secret." I'm used to that, and quite OK with it. Intellectually, I know why I haven't spoken more about my sexuality, but I do wonder if I haven't repressed something there to my detriment. Maybe I could have given comfort to some people if I had dealt with the subject of my private sexuality more, but it's never been my prime mission to give comfort, unless somebody's in drastic need. I'd rather give pleasure, or shake things up.

The passage is, in its way, wholly typical. Apart from the characteristic tension between the mind ("intellectually, I know why") and heart, the awkwardness of which is reflected by the stiffness and the circuitousness of the language ("I do wonder if I haven't repressed something there"), the statement represents yet another triumph of that ferocious intellect at the expense of the realm of feelings. Note the reflexively disdainful dismissal of any possibility that she might have spoken publicly about issues relating to homosexuality as a merely sentimental gesture, a treacly project of "giving comfort."

The issue is worth exploring because of the way in which it reveals how Sontag the political figure made the same revealing choices that Sontag the literary figure did. As we know, Sontag was not above giving comfort to groups that she saw as oppressed, and she did not disdain making large and dramatic public gestures meant to validate the rights, and the humanity, of certain minorities. About the citizens of Bosnia, that province of Mitteleuropa that became one of her intellectual homelands, about Europe and its political outrages, Sontag did not cease to speak, with her usual crispness and a smart, outraged passion. All this was deeply admirable—but finally there was something familiar about the way in which she championed the foreign over the domestic, the idealized identity rather than the core identity. *Intellectually I wanted to go*. As we know, she went; and to be sure, there is a kind of touching grandeur to the famous *folie* of her producing *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo under siege, which, whatever else it may have achieved, certainly gave comfort.

I want to emphasize that my point is not to correct Sontag politically; nor do I want to denigrate the significant positive effects of Sontag's political arguments and activities. Everyone, after all, is self-interpreting and self-inventing—writers and artists more than most. Sontag was a true cosmopolitan, and that is an achievement not only of morality but also of imagination. But cosmopolitanism, too, is a set of choices, and Sontag's choices in this realm so strikingly resemble her choices in the realm of literature and culture that one must wonder whether for her being itself was not, in Peguy's famous formulation, "elsewhere." At a certain point you have to ask why there was this unquenchable need to comfort, this limitless sympathy, for Bosnians, but not for lesbians.

IV.

In the end, it was Sontag herself who gave us the most useful metaphor for understanding her—for making sense of the willed restlessness, the seemingly irresoluble tensions and contradictions that hover over her life and work and politics: paradoxes to which the early private writings already bear striking witness. The key is to be found in *The Volcano Lover*, a work whose ambivalent seesawing between two crucial centuries, between two irreconcilable world-views, tells us more than anything else she wrote about the uneasy divisions in Sontag herself.

The novel is an unusual take on a famous story: the love affair between Emma Hamilton and Admiral Nelson. It is told primarily through the eyes of Emma's cuckolded husband, Sir William Hamilton, the great collector of classical antiquities who, as British envoy to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, in Naples, had the pick of the splendid works that emerged from the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, which helped to create the great craving for all things classical (and neo-classical) that marked the end of the eighteenth century. A good deal of the book is devoted to brilliant ruminations on the nature and the psychology of collecting, a passion apparently shared by the Sontag-like narrator who, like the narrator of *In America*, hovers obtrusively over the opening of the novel. "I'm seeing," this disembodied voice says, during a visit to what seems to be a flea market,

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> I'm checking on what's in the world. What's left. What's discarded. What's no longer cherished. What had to be sacrificed. What someone thought might interest someone else … there may be something valuable, there. Not valuable, exactly. But something I would want. Want to rescue. Something that speaks to me. To my longings.

As we have seen, a taste for "checking on what's in the world," to say nothing of aesthetic rescue missions, constituted a significant part of Sontag's critical project. If anything, Hamilton's own characterization of the point of his activities—"To surround oneself with enchanting and stimulating objects, a superfluity of objects, to ensure that the sense will never be unoccupied, nor the faculty of imagination left unexercised"—reminds you even more strongly of the author of this book, with her frenetic desire to be aesthetically stimulated, occupied, exercised. Of course this novel was the closest to a real literary success that her fiction ever achieved.

The metaphor of the collector is the perfect one for Sontag. Her impressive sympathy for Hamilton, with his great hunger for inanimate objects, explains so much about her—the unbelievable avidity, the impossibility of satiety, the need to possess it all, to know "everything." And it provides, too, another explanation for her incessant promotion, toward the end of her career, of "greatness": like all good collectors, she wanted you to know how precious her objects were, how much they were worth. Small wonder that some of her greatest aesthetic enthusiasms were inspired by collectors—William Hamilton; Walter Benjamin, in his library and in the arcades; Godard, with his "hypertrophy of appetite for culture (though often more avid for cultural debris than for museum-consecrated achievements); they proceed by voraciously scavenging in culture, proclaiming that nothing is alien to their art." It would be hard to think of a better description of Sontag herself.

As it proceeds, *The Volcano Lover* moves away from the eighteenth century, from the cool acquisitive gaze of the Enlightenment, to the "romance" and the passions of the century that followed. (The book's coy subtitle is "A Romance.") In the novel, the romance and the passions are represented by two threads, one "personal" and one "political," that become intertwined. The first is the adulterous love of Nelson and Emma (who abandons, you might say, the love of the old for the love of the new—the elderly Hamilton for the war hero Nelson), and the second are the violent revolutions with which the eighteenth century ended—in particular, the brief republican revolution in Naples in 1799, which resulted in the short-lived overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy (to which Nelson, on orders from London, gave military support, as Hamilton gave diplomatic support, while Emma, for her part, was the bosom friend of the Queen, Maria Carolina, sister of Marie-Antoinette). With Nelson's aid, the republic was soon overthrown and the repressive monarchy was re-established.

What is so moving about the novel lies, as sometimes happens in Sontag's writing, between the lines. For everything about Hamilton is wonderful: the evocation of what it is like to live a life given to intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, the rich sense that Sontag gives of what it is like to "discover what is beautiful and to share that with others," an activity that Hamilton passionately defends as "also a worthy employment for a life." But the poignant fact is that, for all this, Hamilton is not meant to be the hero of the book. This role, it turns out, is given to a person who comes late on the scene: another historical figure, Eleanora Fonseca Pimentel, a Neapolitan aristocrat and poet who sided with the republican rebels and was executed by the restored Bourbons as the exhausted century ended, in August 1799. The book ends with Pimentel's thoughts at the moment of her death—reflections that comprise a stunning rejection of the character, and indeed the values, that Sontag has so feelingly evoked throughout the book. "Did he ever have an original thought," Fonseca Pimentel furiously wonders,

> or subject himself to the discipline of writing a poem, or discover or invent something useful to humanity, or burn with zeal for anything except his own pleasures and the privileges annexed to his station. He knew enough to appreciate what the picturesque natives had left in the way of art and ruins, lying about the ground.…

And the novel's last lines make a final overt allusion to Sontag herself, one that suggests that she saw her political engagement as an expression of this "romantic" side:

> Sometimes I had to forget that I was a woman to accomplish the best of which I was capable. Or I would lie to myself about how complicated it is to be a woman. Thus do all women, including the author of this book. But I cannot forgive those who did not care about more than their own glory or well-being. They thought they were civilized. They were despicable. Damn them all.

Anyone who has considered Sontag's career will find that "damn them all" profoundly affecting. For it expresses, yet again, her desire to forsake who she was in favor of a romantic dream. However inadvertently, *The Volcano Lover* makes it clear that Sontag's was, essentially, the eighteenth-century sensibility that she so brilliantly evoked in the character of Hamilton, whom she ends by damning. An aesthete and an accumulator of experience, she nonetheless yearned all her life—because she was so taught by the kind of novels that she ingested but could not, in the end, ever write—to inhabit the century to which her son touchingly assigns her, the nineteenth, with its grand passions and its Romantic energies. Emotionally, she thought she was the one; intellectually, she was the other. This confusion helps to account for so much about her life and her work: the strange analytical coldness about normal human passions—that desire to make sex "cognitive"—and the remarkably hot passion for the stimulation of books, theater, films; the initial embrace of the importance of the daringly new, the avant garde, the louche and outré, followed by the retreat into the conventional (the historical

A Translation of Silk

One can shove his face against silk
& breathe in centuries of perfume
on the edge of a war-torn morning
where men fell so hard for iron
they could taste it. Now, today
a breeze disturbs a leafy pagoda
printed on slow cloth. A creek
begins to move. His brain trails,
lagging behind his fingers to learn
suggestion is more than radiance
shaped to the memory of hands,
that one of the smallest creatures
knows how to be an impressive god.
A flounce of light is the only praise
it ever receives. I need to trust
this old way of teaching a man
to cry, & I want to believe in
what's left of the mulberry leaves.
Humans crave immortality, but oh,
yes, to think worms wove this
as a way to stay alive in our world.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

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novel!), the canonical, the established, the "great"; the wobbly relationship between the criticism, which was her calling, and the fiction, which was not.

Sontag's lifelong struggle to find a place between these various poles—extremities nicely summed up, in *The Volcano Lovers*, during an amusing encounter between Hamilton and Goethe, as "beauty" and "transformation"—gives her a certain novelistic allure of her own. But here again the character whom she calls to mind is a decidedly pre-Romantic figure. In one of the shortest literary essays that she ever wrote, Sontag ruminated on a favorite novel, and her description of its hero suggests a strong affinity between the critic and the character:

> With Don Quixote, a hero of excess, the problem is not so much that the books are bad; it is the sheer quantity of his reading. Reading has not merely deformed his imagination; it has kidnapped it. He thinks the world is the inside of a book.... Bookishness makes him, in contrast to Emma Bovary, beyond compromise or corruption. It makes him mad; it makes him profound, heroic, genuinely noble.

Thanks to her son's nervous but rewarding decision, Sontag herself has finally achieved a kind of resolution. For she has made the translation that, you sometimes feel, she had always yearned for and so long awaited. Now others must do the interpreting; she herself, beyond compromise and corruption, no madder than most and more noble, too, has become the text. Infinitely interpretable, she has at last ended up on the inside of a book. ◆

Sherwin B. Nuland
MACHO MISERY

HYSTERICAL MEN: THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF MALE NERVOUS ILLNESS
By Mark S. Micale
(Harvard University Press, 384 pp., $29.95)

As far back as has been recorded of the history of human societies, men have equated life with movement. If our ancestors of antiquity could feel stirrings inside their bodies, it must mean that large, living structures were at the very least shifting their positions, and perhaps even migrating from place to place within the mysterious recesses of the internal cavities that encompassed them, whether the abdomen or the chest. Like other peoples of their time, for example, the Egyptians believed that the inner organs were so many distinctive and individual creatures, with whims and moods of their own that determined their peregrinations from neck to pelvis.

Of all the named structures within the abdomen and the chest, those associated with reproduction retained the mysteries of their willful behavior long after others had been solved to the satisfaction of physicians and philosophers. When, in his *Timaeus*, Hippocrates's contemporary Plato called the uterus "an animal within an animal," he meant it to be taken literally. He was echoing a common belief of his time and earlier when he stated that under proper conditions the womb—or *hystera*, as it was called in Greek—"becomes seriously angry and moves all over the body." Chief among those proper conditions was any frustration of its desire to bear children.

Though the Hippocratic physicians themselves, in their general disavowal of the mystical, rejected any idea of all but relatively small degrees of uterine movement (and even that was thought to occur only within the pelvis), most of their medical contemporaries continued for centuries to insist that the female gestational organ had the capacity to leap all over the place, whether through the diaphragm and up into the neck or sideways, downwards, and anywhere else within the body cavities where it might find expression for its moods. In Book II of *On the Causes and Symptoms of Acute Disease*, Aretaeus the Cappadocian, one of the most prominent physicians of the second century C.E., wrote a chapter entitled "On Hysterical Suffocation," in which he described the various symptoms that he attributed to the womb's wanderings, as well as his certainty that it is attracted toward what smells fragrant and flees from what is fetid. Not only odors and barrenness, but also a demanding sexual dissatisfaction, had been implied since Egyptian times as the etiological basis for uterine rovings.

In Aretaeus's description are to be found many of the clinical manifestations associated with the emotional state which in later centuries would become known as hysteria, for the organ with which they were associated. Aretaeus describes what he calls the womb's displacement resulting in violent pressure on other organs, which may result in choking, loss of breath, vertigo, fainting, unconsciousness, headache, loss of function of the extremities, and irregularities of the heartbeat. Even authorities such as the Hippocratics and the great Galen, the giant of medicine in the second century C.E. whose powerful influence would persist for a millennium and a half—and who denied the notion of significant uterine wandering—believed that hysterical symptoms are related to unrequited sexual passion, which was said to deprive the uterus of necessary health-giving moisture. Galen is known to prescribe sexual intercourse for the malady, or manual stimulation of the clitoris or uterine cervix. One way or another, sexually or maternally, the frustrated womb was destined to remain the imputed source of hysteria for many centuries, well into the period when experimental and clinical science had become the basis of the healer's art. And quite obviously, since hysteria originated in the *hystera*, it could not occur in men.

The rising influence of Christianity meant that the naturalistic views of the ancients were displaced by the clergy's supernatural explanations for disease, and the notion that human suffering was the consequence of evil acts or inclinations. Since hysteria exhibited such erratic and otherwise unexplainable symptoms, it was interpreted by many, including the influential Augustine, as evidence of possession by the devil. Ecclesiastical trials were held, prayers and incantations were offered, and many a woman and girl was burned as a witch. All through this period of perhaps a millennium or more, hysteria remained a disease exclusively, archetypically, of females.

The early modern centuries brought a return to—a renaissance of—the search for natural explanations of the phenomena of nature, and particularly of the human body. The writings and the recommendations of the earliest medical scientists and the new breed of clinicians between the mid-fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries were based on the supposition that sufficient study and experimentation would elucidate not only the origins of disease, but its treatment as well. Still, even the most eminent of the new scientists continued to believe that the symptoms of hysteria were related to some dissatisfaction and consequent

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displacement of the womb and perhaps other of the female generative organs. Thus, the disease known commonly as the hysterical passions was likely, in medical writings, to be called *uteri adscensus*, *suffocatio uterina*, *strangulatio vulvae*, or some similar designation.

The Scientific Revolution, that remarkable transformation of European thought that occurred between approximately 1550 and 1700, brought with it an ascendancy of the experimental method and the refusal to believe any explanation of natural phenomena that could not be proven to the satisfaction of the empirical observer. When large numbers of autopsies were performed on women who had died of what was thought to be hysteria, no evidence of uterine abnormality could be identified by objective eyes. Toward the latter part of the seventeenth century, attention was accordingly turned to the brain and nervous system, with the result that two of the leading English physicians of the time, Thomas Willis and Thomas Sydenham, put forth what might be called a "neuropsychological" theory of many diseases, and especially of the so-called "hysteria," which neither of them believed to be in any way connected with the female reproductive organs.

If Willis and Sydenham were correct, the symptoms of hysteria could be found in men—and these physicians showed that they did indeed occur in certain of their male patients. At this point, enter, or re-enter, hypochondriasis, a disease found usually in men and much less commonly in women, which had been recognized from the time of the Greeks, and characterized by discomfort beneath the lowest ribs (perhaps radiating in all directions from the spleen), spreading out into a cluster of unexplainable symptoms very similar to those of hysteria. These provocative suggestions led to a wide variety of theories that were united by the fact that they all referred to these phenomena as "nervous distempers," a term we might replace today by "psychosomatic" or "psychoneurotic" illness.

Nervous distemper became a fashionable diagnosis during the Georgian period of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most particularly as evidence that the patient so afflicted, whether male or female, was of a "feeling" or "sentimental" disposition. Since such a high degree of sensitivity was required to contract it (and it had lost its uterine connotations of effeminacy), the symptoms were soon socially restricted to the upper classes. All manner of authors, poets, philosophers, scientists, composers, and other varieties of intellectual were said to have it, and it was with a certain sense of pride that the well-bred Englishman took to calling it "The English Malady." Unwilling to leave its social and cultural significance to the British alone, many on the Continent claimed it as part of the human condition. Despite the discomforts of its symptomatology, it was unmistakable evidence of refinement. And its very acknowledgement made it permissible for men to admit, finally after more than two millennia, to certain emotional states that had been thought to be the exclusive burden of women. As the medical historian Mark Micale makes clear in his illuminating description of these events and their consequences, "It is not today's psychiatric writing about post-traumatic stress disorders, nor the medical commentary on 'shell-shock' during the First World War, but the early modern discourse on the nervous distempers that represents the first instance of the medicalization of male emotional suffering in the European West."

That sentence articulates one of the underlying messages of Micale's fascinating and important book. For the story of nervous maladies has been, from approximately the end of the Georgian period until relatively recently, a story in which male physicians have returned to their earlier habit of bringing forth theories of female emotionality and mental frailty based on their close—and obviously biased—observation of women, while failing to acknowledge, or perhaps even to observe, that men of all social classes could be shown to suffer from the same ailments. Not from lack of evidence or cases to study did this situation exist, but for a complex of reasons personal and general, ranging from the anxieties of the individual male observers all the way to the growth and perpetuation of a reliable economic and civil order in nineteenth- century society—the political and cultural imperative of a patriarchal structure in which the image of stability and dependability of the rational, clear-thinking male was assured. "Sustaining patriarchy, however," Micale makes clear, "required both idealizing the virtues and denying the vulnerabilities of hegemonic bourgeois masculinity." As a result, the homogeneously male medical community leaned toward restricting their diagnoses of nervous disabilities almost exclusively to female patients, thus contributing to a model of masculine human nature which, although fragile and ultimately shown to be untenable, operated successfully over a span of more than two centuries.

Seeking writings in which symptoms of male hysteria are described in the long period prior to Freud—except, as noted above, during the reign of "The English Malady"—one would have to look for the most part to non-medical sources, because there are figures from the worlds of literature and even philosophy who did not shrink from describing such states, not infrequently in themselves. Whether these sorts of writings are more common or less so in any era, Micale points out, would seem to depend on the degree of gender polarization and general liberalization of the era. Times perceived as periods of stability and personal security were times, he tells us, in which introspective authors were more likely to write, sometimes confessionally, of symptoms recognizable as those of male neurosis. Another factor appears to have been whether the writer conceived of hysteria as a neurologic and therefore physically based disorder, or as one that was psychological and therefore based in emotions. Micale provides an interesting, original, and I believe quite accurate, list of examples of the latter: Burton, Shakespeare, Mandeville, Hume, Cheyne (an eighteenth-century Scottish physician, and the author of a widely read book called *The English Malady*), Johnson, Wordsworth, Mill, Flaubert, and Freud. Of the former, he lists Sydenham, Georget (a nineteenth-century French psychiatrist) and the great Charcot.

In one of the strikingly insightful passages that are characteristic of Micale's perceptive way of looking at the influence of the surrounding culture on European medical thought, he points out that "for most thinkers who were open at all to this line of investigation [the psychological/emotional], literature and introspection were doubtless natural, even inevitable, allies in the systematized study of subjectivity, whereas the strict and exclusionary methodology of positivist science seemed insufficient to the task." The organized research methodology of the laboratory and the university clinic, presented in language that Micale refers to as "the opaque and impenetrable surface of medicine's official rhetoric of science," served to screen the mind of many a thinker from any but a gender-specific interpretation of what was being observed.

The period between the waning years of the Enlightenment and the beginnings of psychoanalysis—roughly speaking, the nineteenth century—was a period of burgeoning activity among an increasingly large group of men dedicated to the intellectual discipline of what Micale

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correctly calls "positivist science," a way of thinking that demands the intellectual and personal distancing of the investigator from the phenomena or persons being investigated. If one studies this era carefully, as he has done to our benefit, it can be observed that the injection of the self into cogitations about human behavior was vigorously rejected, to the point where any such inner envisionings were considered not only unscientific but even unmasculine, a threat to the self that must be avoided at all costs. And this introduces another consideration: Micale argues, quite originally to my knowledge, that "the specter of male physicians gazing with passionate intensity on other adult men in intimate emotional distress suggested an unacceptable homoerotic intimacy."

The foregoing factors, bolstering one another, brought about a long stretch of time when the likelihood of identifying the reality of the real hysteria, the gender-free hysteria, became vanishingly small. It was not until psychodynamic psychiatry appeared, heralded by the studies of Freud toward the end of the century, that the *terra incognita* of the human psyche was accepted by scientifically-minded physicians as an independent field of study, one that must be explored without pre-judgment regardless of where the investigator might be taken by the clues that appeared, especially if from their own internal thoughts. Despite their splintering into sects, the new groups of observers of the mind's inner workings probed in usefully subjective ways into problems that they recognized as arising in the depths of the unconscious mind.

Like a wind of freshness not to be denied, the new thinking, much more free of a gendered notion of illness than its predecessors, spread to successive generations of mental health workers after Freud, with the result that notions such as the exclusively feminine nature of hysteria began to be eroded. But after some three millennia in which it dominated, the concept of the disgruntled *hystera* has proven to be difficult to dislodge. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association for 1979, known as DSM-III, still listed "hysterical neurosis" as an accepted entity, and it was not until 1994 that it was replaced in DSM-IV by the term "conversion reactions."

Though the scientists and physicians of the nineteenth century clung adamantly to notions of female-gendered hysteria, the work of at least one of them contained powerful elements that would presage the beginnings of change. Jean-Martin Charcot, appointed in 1862 to be chief of medical service at the huge Parisian hospital complex called the Salpêtrière, became increasingly interested in neurological diseases. It was in the 1870s that he turned his prodigious attention to the problem of hysteria, and began to publish the clinical descriptions of dozens of such patients, many of whom were men. His writings refuted uterine theories of hysteria that were enjoying a resurgence of popularity in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Though it was his opinion that twenty female victims of the disorder existed for every male, he insisted not only that the uterus had nothing to do with the case, but also that male hysteria could occur in any social class, including the most impoverished. More, he stated boldly that there was nothing particularly effeminate about his male patients, a notion that others had put forth to link its existence to lack of proper masculinity or to excessive refinement.

It was Charcot's belief that hysteria's cause was relatively simple: it was due to an underlying hereditary predisposition upon which an acute triggering episode is suddenly imposed. When he was unable to identify the hereditary organic lesion or chemical imbalance in any of the sixty-one males whose histories and findings he published, he explained its absence by postulating the existence of an as-yet-undetectable diffuse physiological abnormality of the nervous system. He was certain that the nature of the abnormality would eventually be discovered with advances in science. In other words, Charcot felt certain that hysteria was an organic disease and no respecter of gender differences.

Charcot's suppositions did not sit well with many European and American neurologists. They reasoned that since the actual organic basis of hysteria had not been discovered, it might mean that the origin of the illness would be found in the psyche, and therefore the psyche of the male and of the female are less different one from the other than had always been supposed. Such a notion, Micale suggests, made many physicians distinctly uncomfortable and therefore ambivalent about the very conclusions that they were drawing from Charcot's rigorous work. One response to this was to make little or no mention of male hysteria in the textbooks of the time. Another was to deny the statistic of one in twenty, and ratchet it up to one in a hundred or higher. Some authorities ignored hysteria completely or combined it with other diseases when making the diagnosis in men, so that new entities such as hystero-epilepsy, hystero-neuropathy, and traumatic hystero-neurasthenia began to appear, always far more frequently among male than female patients.

No matter their approach, the typical French physician who accepted the notion of male hysteria continued to think that its victims were in some way sexually abnormal: "Thus, despite Charcot's innovative work, the male victim of hysteria in late-nineteenth century French medical imagination was still frequently envisioned as an effeminate heterosexual, an overt homosexual, or a physical or emotional hermaphrodite." If not different sexually, male hysterics were said to be different in other ways, such as race or nationality, among whom African, African-American, south Asian, Arab, or Eastern European Jewish men predominated. Outside of France, other methods of denial appeared, such as the suggestion that male hysteria was restricted to Frenchmen. The medical literature of the time is full of evasions and denials and contradictions of the truths that Charcot had quite obviously demonstrated.

These trends were reflected in the artistic contributions of the period, exemplified most perfectly by the literature of the so-called French decadent school as well as by the large number of sexually ambiguous characters that appeared in its paintings. The parallel in Britain was the aesthetic movement and a tradition of literary homosexuality. Another factor was the noteworthy British phenomenon that manifested itself as the movement that Micale refers to as "the literature of generational revolt," in which young men reject the Victorian authority of powerful patriarchal figures. Throughout Europe and America, writers and artists were attacking the rigid images of high Victorian respectability, but the physicians remained reluctant to join them.

In the midst of all of this, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate of the University of Vienna medical school with advanced training in clinical medicine, brain anatomy, and neurological research, arrived in Paris, in 1885. Sigmund Freud was dazzled by Charcot, and deeply impressed by his work on hysteria. He soon abandoned any thoughts of continuing his microscopical and laboratory work, and began to study his idolized teacher's notions of the importance of traumatic experiences. When he returned to Vienna in April 1886 to open his private office, nervous disorders, and particularly cases of hysteria in both men and women, comprised most of his practice.

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By October of that year, he appeared before a meeting of the Vienna Society of Physicians to lecture on a case of male hysteria he had seen in Paris, and returned five weeks later to discuss a case of the disorder in a patient of his own, and implications of its characteristics that can only be described as psychoanalytic. As Micale notes, "Psychoanalysis originated as a theory and therapy of hysteria, the paradigmatic malady of fin-de-siècle Europe; but Freud's initial encounter with the neurosis began with his study of hysteria *in men*."

As time passed, Freud turned increasingly away from Charcot's organic explanation and looked into the psychic pre-history of the disease and the unconscious and sexual lives of his patients, both male and female. When in 1895 he published, with Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, the volume that Micale calls "the first distinctly psychoanalytic book," he illustrated his emerging theories by describing five patients, all women. Micale enumerates several possible reasons for the absence of male examples (though Freud had treated many), of which Breuer's reluctance to play the intellectual revolutionary is the most convincing.

After Freud broke with Breuer and took up a new and productive relationship with Wilhelm Fliess, he relied more and more on the combination of personal self-examination and the clinical observation of his patients. His self-analysis became a crucial element in his investigative methodology, along with his case studies and his voluminous reading. Considerable academic scholarship has been devoted to the Freud-Fliess correspondence since it was published in the 1980s, all erroneously stating that Freud's hysteria patients of the 1890s were entirely female. There were in fact many male analysands, and they were just as important to the evolution of his theories—about hysteria and everything else—as their feminine counterparts.

The fact is that the notion of male hysteria has remained difficult for male physicians to accept, even in relatively recent times. Among other reasons for this state of affairs, claims Micale, the "turning of the male gaze inward" at itself is too threatening, too fraught with the danger of discovering elements of femininity in the masculine psyche, too much liable to result in an unacceptable homoerotic perception. "Fear, vanity and the drive for power are the underlying sentiments operating in this story."

With the progress of psychoanalytic psychology introduced by Freud, the psychodynamics underlining the denial have been revealed, Micale tells us, to be that the male "psychological imperative to free oneself from infant maternal identification … requires a continual censuring of the eternal 'feminine within.'" Culture often operates against science. For hundreds if not thousands of years, these traditions of gender stereotypes and sexual anxieties have hindered opportunities for insight into the existence and the nature of male hysteria.

The long tale of hysteria makes a fascinating, if often convoluted, story. It would have been all too easy for a writer without Mark Micale's skills to have lost his readers within the multiplicity of theories, debates, terminologies, and misapprehensions of various epochs, but he has somehow managed to follow the tortuous narrative line through a tangle of disconnected confusions that are all but incomprehensible to a twenty-first-century mind. Certainly, it was often incomprehensible to physicians, intellectuals, and other reasonably well-educated people who lived through hysteria's various incarnations and explanations. But Micale has done more than tell a good story. He has made numerous perceptive interpretations along the way, scouring the state of concomitant literature and art in order to seek the ambient clues that come together to form the supporting structure for much of his theoretical speculation.

What Micale has accomplished is a tour de force of medical, cultural, and psychological detective work. In his hands, the three-thousand-year refusal of the medical world to acknowledge the existence of hysteria in any but females is proven to have a perfectly understandable psychoanalytic basis, but it has taken a scholar of wide-ranging intellectual background and enormous perspicacity to build, era by era, to its discovery and the construction of his impressively supported thesis. He has provided a model for other scholars to follow, not least in demonstrating by example that a historian of medicine must be also a historian of culture. ◆

Ross Posnock
BLACK IS BRILLIANT

ALAIN LOCKE:
THE BIOGRAPHY OF A PHILOSOPHER
By Leonard Harris
and Charles Molesworth
(University of Chicago Press,
432 pp., $45)

In conversation in London with the British Conservative leader David Cameron this past summer, Barack Obama lamented the frantic over-scheduling that encourages micromanagement and with it the temptation to try and "solve everything and end up being a dilettante." Instead, he concluded, "the most important thing you need to do is to have big chunks of time during the day when all you're doing is thinking." His remark, not meant to be made public but caught on tape, did not make a big splash, but the importance that Obama accorded to the need to stop and think must count as one of the more revealing moments of his campaign, not least because it gives some substance to the tag "intellectual" that the media attached to him this past summer. Obama is a cunning professional politician, but he is also undeniably an intellectual, and that word—along with the cluster of others invariably summoned up: bloodless professorial elitist egghead—became a catchall term of opprobrium. But with his victory came a rehabilitation of "intellectual" as a term of pride: a *New York Times* columnist crowed that "the second most remarkable thing about his election is that American voters have just picked a president who is an open, out-of-the-closet, practicing intellectual." What would W. E. B. Du Bois say?

One of the great intellectuals of any color, the prodigious Du Bois comes to mind because, for him, a significant part of being an intellectual was tied up with what Obama spoke of in London—the capacity for, and the luxury of, stepping back from busyness to think. "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not," Du Bois famously declared, reflecting belief in the "kingdom of culture" as a space of freedom, a realm "uncolored," above the imprisoning veil of the color line. On a fellowship to Berlin in 1892 while pursuing graduate work in economics, history, and sociology at Harvard, where he would be the first black recipient of

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a doctorate, Du Bois was initiated into aesthetic experience: "I had been before, above all, in a hurry, I wanted a world hard, smooth and swift, and had no time for … unhurried thought and slow contemplation. Now at times I sat still." He grew inward with Beethoven and Wagner, Rembrandt and Titian.

For black Americans in Jim Crow America, this capacity of relaxing into thought and aesthetic pleasure was stunted by a double burden: the reign of white supremacy, grounded in the alleged law of God and Biology which held that black people were primarily bodies with, at best, the minds of children, and the unwitting ratification of that law by the leader of black America, Booker T. Washington. He restricted black education to the hand and the heart, and not the head. To be seen carrying books at the Tuskegee Institute risked punishment, an echo of the plantation custom of severing a slave's finger or hand if caught reading. Instead Washington's school was devoted to making the Negro humble and useful to the rural communities of the south—to know one's place, as it was defined by the Wizard of Tuskegee, who scorned as useless learning the sight of a black child studying a French grammar.

Working hand in glove with Northern philanthropists, Washington's disdain for educating black minds made shrewd economic sense, as it ensured a steady supply of cheap, non-unionized farm labor to keep the cost of cotton profitable. Washington described Tuskegee itself as serene, rooted "upon the solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature." Hence a black intellectual was a repugnant oxymoron who violated Nature—Washington called them "artificial" men, "graduates of New England colleges" with decadent tastes for "kid gloves" and "fancy boots." He likely had the dapper mulatto Du Bois in mind. Washington's anti-elitism is a hardy perennial of American life. It expresses what is our national second nature—the rage to purify bound up in the simplifying power of "American pastoral," as Philip Roth calls our ineradicable will to innocence that divides the world in two. Nature—the preserve of the rural, the pre-modern, the authentic, and the masculine—defines itself against the Unnatural—the Babylon of modernity, urban foppery, effeminacy, and intellectuality.

Du Bois distilled the disturbance embodied in the idea of a black intellectual into a word: he called it a "problem." And the "strange experience" of "how it feels to be a problem" is the haunting subject of his masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk*, which appeared in 1903. The book's most famous chapter demolishes Washington, cleverly turning the charge of effeteness against him by denouncing his stance as counseling "unmanly" submission. The most vivid and pained portrait of the "problem" of being a black intellectual forms the book's sole work of fiction, Du Bois's great short story "Of the Coming of John." Here, in a displaced, symbolic autobiography, Du Bois meets the challenge of representing a newly emergent social type who seemed to affront every way of making sense of black identity in Jim Crow America. Attending a provincial college, John Jones grows from rowdy frat boy to becoming intoxicated with the "world of thought."

To represent, in 1903, a black man thinking pushed the perversity of intellection to an extreme. John's capacity for becoming lost in thought becomes the tale's motif: listening to *Lohengrin* at the Metropolitan Opera, he is lost in aesthetic bliss, and the final scene of Du Bois's story finds him humming Wagner's music, barely aware of the onrushing lynching party as it descends upon him. (He has killed the white man who was molesting his sister.) Eerily indifferent to his imminent demise, John in his trancelike absorption becomes unintelligible, a status that registers the black intellectual's historical reality in that era: stranded in a no-man's-land, seeming neither to know his place nor to have a place, hence synonymous with enigma.

John Jones tastes the freedom of life above the veil, and in a sense he dies of it. His paralysis seemed to serve his creator as an object lesson, a warning, even a spur to the torrential productivity, versatility, and creativity that defined Du Bois's own career. He conducted that career, of course, not on the lofty heights of his ideal "kingdom of culture" but within the veil, where he was "kept in bounds" by the daily humiliations of segregation. He died in 1963 at ninety-five in his friend Nkrumah's independent state of Ghana, on the eve of the march on Washington. For all his accomplishments, Du Bois always believed that white racism, as he said in 1934, "has made me far less rounded a human being than I should like to have been." Coupled with that cost was his ineradicable sense of self-sacrifice in behalf of race service, and the twin constraints shape the concluding tableau of "Of the Coming of John." It is a compelling mix of defiance and doom, as Du Bois wrapped John Jones in the robes of tragedy. And later writers' incarnations of the black intellectual, even when imbued with mordant wit and gallows humor, by and large remained garbed in tragedy for much of the century, as if born with a birthright of existential anguish. The titles alone tell the tale: *Invisible Man*; *Nobody Knows My Name*; *The Outsider*; *American Hunger*.

Alain Locke, who was born in Philadelphia in 1885, was seventeen years younger than Du Bois, and had little use for the pathos of blackness. He declined the cloak of tragedy: "I am not a race problem. I am Alain LeRoy Locke," he declared as he arrived at Oxford as the first African American Rhodes Scholar.

Locke regarded his iron confidence as his birthright as a proper and proud member of an old free black family of educators. The son and grandson of highly cultivated people on both sides, Locke was nearly blasé about entering Harvard in 1904. His letters home from college bear little evidence of anxiety. By 1912 he was a professor of philosophy at Howard, where he would teach for four decades.

Locke remains best known as a prime catalyst of the blossoming of black literary and artistic life in 1925 known as the Harlem Renaissance, which he showcased in his landmark anthology *The New Negro*. Always a controversial figure—"the high priest of the intellectual snobbocracy" was not an untypical reaction—Locke is now the subject of a first biography that rescues him from caricature and brings alive his distinctive fashioning of the role of black intellectual. Like Du Bois, Locke studied at the University of Berlin before taking a Harvard doctorate. And as they returned from the relative freedom of Europe, both men would wrestle with "unreconciled strivings," as Du Bois called the tension between race man and aesthete, between puritan and pagan, between the pursuit of social justice and the self-cultivation embodied in their cherished German ideal of *Bildung*.

It was a homegrown figure, William James, whom Du Bois and Locke held in common as an intellectual touchstone. Of his Harvard mentor, Du Bois had declared in his autobiography: "God be praised that I landed squarely in the arms of William James." James had pretty much retired from teaching by the time Locke entered Harvard, but when he lectured at Oxford in 1908, Locke was a most receptive member of the audience. James's pragmatism spoke with particular urgency to these black thinkers. Along with Franz Boas's anthropology, which was another crucial influence on both Du Bois and Locke, pragmatism was a tool that virtually stood alone from

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turn-of-the-century behavioral and social sciences in opposing the theory and the practice of white supremacy. Pragmatist pluralism, like Boasian contextualism, dismissed what James called "all the great single word answers to the world's riddle, such as God, the One … Nature" and "*The* Truth," as "perfect idols of the rationalistic mind!"

Locke possessed a cool detachment that was the source of a remarkable self-awareness and absence of self-pity, qualities that allowed him to minimize and to manage the pathos that inevitably afflicted an American of his gifts, ambitions, and color. Like all black intellectuals of his era he found himself "trapped between two worlds," but unlike many others Locke seemed to resolve the frustrations. Unlike Du Bois, he did not make a career out of them. He would never be capable, at least in public, of the flamboyant histrionics that Du Bois displays at the start of his autobiography: "Crucified on the vast wheel of time, I flew round and round with the Zeitgeist, waving my pen … to see, foresee and prophesy." The audacity of Du Bois's mind set him apart, and eventually made him a world-historical figure. Locke knew his own limits and was guided by a stoic steadiness and an irony about himself that helped him to persevere and thereby to avoid becoming one more burned-out case, the fate of many of his famous Harlem friends.

Refusing to be a "problem," Locke instead led a life "in the key of paradox," as he retrospectively remarked. And his cultivation of paradox has always kept him out of focus. Contemporary scholars tend to simplify by casting him either as a race man or an apolitical aesthete. Yet in fact, as Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth show, Locke kept up the pressure on both roles, as his thought continually refined itself and deepened. Though he wrote excellent literary journalism, he was primarily an academic philosopher, and the slim amount of his published work reflected a pace customary in his discipline. If and when he is read these days it is for his introduction to *The New Negro*.

But the current neglect of Alain Locke should not make us skeptical of the claim made by his biographers, who call him "the most influential African American intellectual born between W. E. B Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr." They are right. Locke won acclaim as the self-described "philosophical mid-wife" to the Harlem Renaissance. But his most interesting writings on race and culture remain his least known, perhaps because they challenge the racial chauvinism that the race man inevitably traffics in. These writings, mostly from the later decades of his career—"The Contribution of Race to Culture," "Who and What is 'Negro'?" and "Frontiers of Culture" (all found in Leonard Harris's valuable collection of Locke's writings)—adumbrate an anti-proprietary notion of cosmopolitanism that urges us to consider that "culture has no color … there is no monopoly, no special proprietary rights" about culture. Unfortunately, this biography, for all its careful explication of Locke's ideas, neglects Locke's richest reflections.

Alain Locke by Jack Coughlin for The New Republic

The paradoxical Locke, barely five feet and with a rheumatic heart, was a whirlwind of activity, an unabashed elitist and aesthete but one who refused what he called "an ivory tower of colorless cosmopolitanism" and instead "dug deep into the human soil." His cosmopolitanism was hands-on and immersive. An inveterate world traveler not only to Europe but also Egypt and Russia and Africa, an expert on and collector of African art, Locke's worldliness inspired his recognition that cultures are not discrete organic wholes embodying a nation's blood but composite, impure assemblages, created in reciprocal exchange with other cultures. His global and trans-national perspectives—what he called "intercultural reciprocity"—were way ahead of their time.

He made his reputation with his race work in the "human soil" back home, where he became a self-described "advocate of cultural racialism as a defensive counter-move for the American Negro." His advocacy proved effective because he had mastered the cultural politics of the two centers of black intellectual life: Washington D.C., his professional outpost as a professor at Howard, and New York City, where, especially after 1925, he visited most weekends and kept a room in Harlem. Charming and generous, adept at cultivating the powerful but with a fine eye for younger talent, Locke knew everyone, was a tireless organizer of educational programs, musical productions, publishing and lecture series, and awards dinners, while chairing countless editorial, foundation, and fellowship boards. As the personal executor and confidante to a wealthy and eccentric white patron, the patronizing Charlotte Osgood Mason, known to all as "Godmother," Locke distributed stipends while enduring her romantic racialist fatuities: she called him "my precious brown boy" and, believing that "all Negroes are after all the children of the sun," urged him to be more natural and "slough off this weight of white culture."

Locke's role as consummate insider dispensing largesse made him a lightning rod for criticism. Some of it was justified: as an editor, he compromised the radicalism of Claude McKay's poetry and had a nasty rivalry with the novelist and editor Jesse Fauset. Conflicted emotions and frayed relations marked virtually all Locke's friendships with the writers he took up and put down—among them Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes (with whom he was once romantically involved), and Zora Neale Hurston. Few were as flagrantly divided as Hurston, a principal recipient, along with Hughes, of Godmother's philanthropy. Hurston began her long and combative association with Locke as his student at Howard, where his skepticism of racial uplift and absolutist thinking was an important influence. She once urged him to succeed Du Bois as the central race leader, but after reading Locke's less than warm review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she

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called him, in a letter to James Weldon Johnson, "a malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees."

Not only was Locke inevitably caught in the crossfire to which any gatekeeper is exposed, but his imperious manner only made matters worse. His suavity bothered even himself ("my tongue never tires as you know," he wrote his doting mother, "indeed it is oiled to an appalling slickness.... I don't know that I can even be sincere with you"), and the open secret of his homosexuality (which made, he once said, a "haughty distrust" mandatory) made him a target for gossip and ridicule. Detested by some, respected by many, Locke possessed an undeniable intellectual brilliance and a capacious vision of world culture. For aspiring writers such as Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray seeking to break out of the racial province, he was a "heroic figure."

Growing up a pampered only child, Locke once recalled that his mother "dipped me as a very young child in the magic waters of cold cynicism and haughty distrust and disdain of public opinion." His mother, according to Locke's estimate, raised "an almost hurt-proof child." The "almost" pointed to what he called his "all too vulnerable Achilles heel of homosexuality—which she may have suspected was there, both for her sake and my own safety—I kept in an armored shoe of reserve and haughty caution." That remoteness came easy. Laughter was barred in the Locke household. Instead his father smiled and whistled, and (as his son explained) "the smile substituted not in a sour but in a debonair way—This was the antidote of being Negro—the distinguished protest of the second and third generation away from slavery."

The startling frankness of Locke's remark raises questions. In a white world where black laughter was the image of the happy and ignorant "Sambo," was the household taboo on impulse and spontaneity, the Lockes' commitment in effect to anti-nature, an equal and opposite deformation inflicted by racism? Harris and Molesworth wisely favor a less moralistic reading; they suggest that Locke's upholding of anti-nature turns his renunciation of spontaneous impulse from a symptom of racist confinement into a valuable basis of receptivity to the discipline of style and technical mastery. Locke revered African art precisely because it lacked the sloppy exuberance and naïvete of the African American spirit, which had been formed in response to the "peculiar experience in America." African art was "disciplined, sophisticated, laconic and fatalistic"—in short, much like Alain Locke.

At Oxford as a Rhodes, he happily succumbed to the social whirl of campus life—he was soon changing clothes four and five times a day to keep up with his social calendar, and before long was deeply in debt to tailors and food emporiums—and eventually tasted of the wider freedoms, cultural and sexual, offered by London, Paris, and Berlin. Locke's four years on the continent encouraged devotion to what he called his one religion, the Greek ideal of friendship, and all his life he treasured his relations with sensitive young men. Perhaps his most adored was Langston Hughes, whom he long pursued until Hughes finally surrendered for a time in Paris in the spring and summer of 1924.

But there was more going on at Oxford than high life. Though he had declared "I'm not going to England as a Negro," that is, as a "dime museum freak" on exhibition as a representative of the race, Southern white Rhodes scholars would not let him forget his color. They made every effort to exclude and to embarrass him. Oxford's Cosmopolitan Club came to the rescue, an oasis of hospitality amid the attempts to segregate him. At the Cosmopolitan Club, Locke met impressive men of color, including several who were colonial subjects of the British Empire, "men who impressed Locke with their commitment to return to their various countries and serve the interests of their people."

Locke's community of friends at the Club began to raise his racial and political consciousness, making him come to grips with the cultural legacy of Africa and with the outrages of imperialism. He began to devise an intense cosmopolitanism as a weapon against segregation and rigid classification—enemies shared by William James. By 1911, the year he returned to the United States, he was on his way to becoming an Africanist and human paradox: a cosmopolitan race man.

This double perspective guided Locke's most lasting achievement: the editorship of the epochal anthology *The New Negro*, which surveyed, and was itself a part of, the artistic and intellectual ferment of the Harlem Renaissance. "Locke had been preparing for the Renaissance for almost two decades," Harris and Molesworth report. His years in Europe amid urban modernism, his academic training in pragmatism with its emphasis on democratic pluralism, his diverse contacts and interests: all this helped to make Locke, though he neither lived in Harlem nor was an editor, the man for the moment. His chance came when he was asked to edit a special Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*, a leading progressive magazine of sociology and culture. Locke assembled a diverse and stellar group of contributors (while playing down sociology and economics, which he found dull, and adding more art and literature), and made the Harlem issue a hit, selling over thirty thousand copies and generating so much attention that it soon gave birth to an expanded hardcover edition called *The New Negro*. It contained articles on art, music, sociology, anthropology and history, poems, stories, drama, original art work; its contributors were young and old, black, white, male, female, all viewing matters from vantages variously local, national, and international.

Locke's introduction set the turbulent scene of Harlem in global perspective. In Harlem, he wrote, "the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life"—African, West Indian and Negro American—is the "laboratory of a great race-welding," as "the elements undergo "contact and interaction." As the "home of the Negro's 'Zionism,'" Harlem bids to be a "race capital," and is at the center of the "mission of rehabilitating the race in world esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been responsible." "As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international." Harlem "has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia." Admiring these "nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination," Locke gives voice to a romantic nationalism akin to Herder's.

Embracing global cosmopolitan modernity, *The New Negro* sought to bury the deadly clichés of white paternalism: "the day of 'aunties,' 'uncles,' and 'mammies'" are redolent of "yesterday," as are "Uncle Tom and Sambo" as emblems of a naïve and humble race. The American mind, Locke declared in the title essay, "must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro" and a "new group psychology" of "self-respect" derived from a "deep feeling of race." This "renewed race-spirit" "consciously and proudly sets itself apart." But lest his claim seem to align him with Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement—a significant force in Harlem in the 1920s but barely present in *The New Negro*—Locke sets this proud race spirit squarely within the democratic ideals of America: "the Negro mind reaches out as yet to nothing but American wants, American

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ideas. But this forced attempt to build his Americanism on race values is a unique social experiment, and its ultimate success is impossible except through the fullest sharing of American culture and institutions." To those Americans who hope that "the trend of Negro advance is wholly separatist," Locke replies: "this cannot be—even if it were desirable," because "democracy itself is obstructed and stagnated to the extent that any of its channels are closed." He was fanning new life into Du Bois's famous question to his white readers near the end of *The Souls of Black Folk*—"your country? How came it yours?" Du Bois's point is that "before the Pilgrims landed we were here" and "mingled our blood" with this nation, facts that expose what his readers would prefer not to know—the reality of motley mixture.

After 1925, Locke's fame and audience broadened, with visiting appointments at University of Wisconsin, the New School, a lecture at Harvard, membership in prestigious interracial collaborations. But accounts of his career usually look only at the Locke of the Harlem Renaissance years, who championed beauty over the use of art as propaganda. This biography's account of his later decades valuably complicates the conventional image of Locke as a rarefied elitist by showing in detail that by the mid-1930s Locke acknowledged that there was "no cure or saving magic in art" in a world of "capitalistic exploitation" and the "disease-and crime-ridden slum." He supported the New Deal, and though he was never a man of the left ("too Philadelphian for that!"), his concern for aesthetics gave way to politics, especially on the issues of democracy, race, and citizenship. Challenging what he dubbed "the most sacrosanct of all our secular concepts, the autonomous sovereignty of the self-arbiter nation," Locke urged the abandonment of the "Pax Romana of irrepressible power politics" that rules America's economic imperialism of "dollar diplomacy," and its replacement by a "Pax democratica of reciprocal international rights and responsibilities" that "would give democracy full moral stature."

The dire state of world politics, the bellicose ethnic nationalisms that used "race as a political instrument" to foment violence, led him to revisit his own earlier use of race as a political instrument in the 1920s. He looked back on *The New Negro* as "defensive, promotive propaganda." In 1950, he confessed that he was "both proud and ashamed" of his "brain child": the Harlem Renaissance had been valuable but it did not achieve its potential, owing to a "false conception of culture" as a "market-place commodity." Once the "New Negro" took hold, it "offered that irresistible American lure of a vogue of success … an easy cheap road to vicarious compensation." Instead of emphasizing the "substance" of Negro life, "complexion" came first. Locke had learned an important lesson, a way to grasp race and culture that would defuse racial anger and cultural chauvinism: "Culture-goods, once evolved, are no longer the exclusive property of the race or people that originated them. They belong to all who can use them; and belong most to those who can use them best." More succinctly, "culture has no color."

Locke here reaches back to the teachings of an earlier generation, as in effect he revives and adapts for the mid-century world an insight of his Howard colleague and mentor Kelly Miller, a prominent turn-of-the-century race leader and later a professor of mathematics. In 1905, in his "open letter" to the white Southern novelist Thomas Dixon, Miller refuted the familiar claim that "the Negro lives in the light of the white man's civilization." The white man, Miller asserted, "has no exclusive proprietorship of civilization. White man's civilization is as much a misnomer as the white man's multiplication table. It is the equal inheritance of anyone who can appropriate and apply it." As Du Bois did earlier in his notion of the uncolored "kingdom of culture," and Locke would do later in equating the anti-proprietary and the cosmopolitan, Miller de-racialized culture by making one's relation to it a matter of present action, not prior identity. What becomes pivotal is the desire and capacity for doing—for sitting with Shakespeare.

The imperative to act in a world in which "all is shades and no boundaries" and experience "overflows its own definition," was how William James described the premises of his "radical empiricism," a vision articulated at Oxford when Locke heard him lecture. James emphasized that pluralism is the "permanent form" of the world, which entails treating "assured conclusions concerning matters of fact" as hypotheses, subject to "modification in the course of future experience." Although Locke's biographers are clear about his pragmatist orientation, they confine it to a distrust of absolutist systems and to "cultural relativism," while ignoring how liberating was James's insouciance toward alleged necessities, his skepticism of the authority of origin, essence, and identity, and his esteem for the unclassified and unbounded.

In minimizing James's influence and Kelly Miller's, Harris and Molesworth inevitably scant Locke's rejection of the proprietary. The one time the word comes up is in a letter from the late 1920s that they cite, in which Locke remarks that "I hold to no proprietary notion about human relationships. Jealousy and the monopoly it implies … I hold essentially vulgar." Here, had they realized it, is the emotional ground of Locke's intellectual affinity for anti-proprietary cosmopolitanism. Locke thought the idea so important that he regarded it as an inevitable part of a "solution reconciling nationalism with internationalism, racialism with universalism." We ignore this anti-proprietary understanding of culture at our peril, he warned, for "the vicious practice of vested proprietary interests in various forms of culture" undergirds imperialism and is responsible for the "tragedies of history." What must be recovered, he insisted, is the "long ignored" but "very elemental historical fact" of "an almost limitless natural reciprocity between cultures. Civilization, for all its claims of distinctiveness, is a vast amalgam of cultures."

This rejection of the primacy of identity in matters of culture remains insufficiently appreciated in our day. The idea and its avatars are overshadowed by the prestige of multiculturalism, with its coarse tribalism and its ugly purism. So I am glad to note a rare exception to this neglect. In 1968, Philip Rieff, the great sociologist of culture, attempted to rescue Kelly Miller from oblivion: "Shakespeare and Whitman belonged to him; they were part of his inalienable life; they did not belong to butchers in London or slobs in Camden simply because they happen to be white men. Race is the most terrible cultural simplification of all; in his wisdom and learning, Miller rejected the fatal simplicity that the provenance of a value determined membership in it." And, echoing Locke, Rieff proclaimed that "a culture has no color … A high culture is a living and active faith." Rieff was writing in the midst of a resurgence of identity politics—more specifically, of the black nationalist celebration of "black values." A few years later Rieff remarked that the slogan "black is beautiful" played into the remissive role that white radicals—most egregiously Norman Mailer—invited blacks to enact; and, with the "nobility" of Du Bois in mind, Rieff hoped that the slogan might be replaced by "Black is Brilliant." Had he been alive on January 20, 2009, Rieff might have admitted that his wish had been granted. ◆

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Washington Diarist

At the Window

Of three or four in a room
there is always one who stands at
the window.
He must see the injustice among the
thorns
and the fires on the hill.

So wrote Yehuda Amichai in 1958, and I have been feeling rather like the morbid observer who has wandered away from the warm company. The glass through which I gaze is far from the place that I lovingly and disquietedly see; I have to squint past the coercions of the media, and correct also for the distortions of solidarity. But in Israel now I see fires on the hill. I have a sickened feeling about the recent campaign in Gaza. No sovereign state can accept regular aggressions across its border, but Operation Cast Lead seems to have accomplished nothing. Hamas is again firing its rockets, Israel is again retaliating against them, and Israeli politicians are again making virile promises to finish the job. The suffering of the people of Gaza during the war was partly the responsibility of their own astoundingly callous leaders, but not entirely. Israel's choice of tactics and strategies was its own; and when it chose blunt instruments, it guaranteed harsh consequences. Even the most exquisite code of military ethics cannot morally secure a massive air and ground assault upon a densely populated city. The revelations in *Haaretz* last week did not surprise me. There is a climate of dread and anger in Israel now. In the old days, Israeli soldiers boasted about "purity of arms." Now they boast that *ba'al ha-bayit hishtage'a*, which in the Hebrew vernacular is like saying that the country went postal. I do not mean to improve the past: "purity of arms" was sometimes dishonored, and it is a mistake to regard self-defense sentimentally. No just war was ever fought only justly. No state was ever innocent, but not all states are evil. Yet in the Jewish state now I detect a coarsening of conscience—for example, in the commonly heard extenuation that Hamas hides its murderers behind children. So it does; but this means only that another way at them, another course of action, must be found. It cannot mean that children may be killed. Morality is a restraining consideration. Will Hamas therefore have exploited the finer sensibilities of Israel? Absolutely; but Israel can hardly repudiate the very qualities for which it asks to be admired. In the struggle between Hamas and Israel, it is Hamas that is the party of dehumanization. In its sad way, the recent controversy about Israel's conduct in Gaza was a beautiful thing, because the truest test of the moral condition of a society is its willingness to examine its moral condition.

Israel's desire to find a military solution to a military problem is understandable. But the Palestinians are not a military problem; and insofar as Hamas holds sway over a large part of Palestinian life, it too cannot be regarded as just a job for the army. I expect to hear more and more calls for Israel to talk to Hamas. But about what, precisely? Surely not about peace. Hamas's view of peace is loud and plain, and only a meretricious credulity can suggest otherwise. And communications about prisoner exchanges and cease-fires and other practicalities already occur. Anyway, why should Israel do for Hamas what Hamas cannot do for itself, which is to destroy Abu Mazen? The departure of Salam Fayyad was discouraging enough. And yet this is not all that needs to be said. Perhaps the most troubling development in Israel now is the collapse of its diplomatic imagination. Its faith in itself seems almost entirely a faith in its force. This is itself a strategic failure. The most perfect representative of this hopelessness is Benjamin Netanyahu, who cannot bring himself to say a good word about a two-state solution, which is the sole solution there can be, now or ever. He is for Palestinian economic development, which is fine but evasive. He warns about Iran, which is right but also evasive. The only peace process that interests Netanyahu is the one with Washington. Otherwise he and the rest of Israel's intellectually paralyzed leadership are quite relieved to intone that there is "no partner," as if the insistence that there is no partner is not also a way of insuring that there is no partner; and soon, yet again, at a late hour, and mainly for the Americans, an Israeli government will try to shore up the weak but real partner it had all along in Ramallah. And there are significant steps that Israel can take that require no partner, and may provide some assurances to Palestinians. (The settlements are not the obstacle to peace, but they are an obstacle to peace. *They defy reason.*) Without such assurances, the terrifying polarization, the ominous alienation of the communities, will continue. But can people who need assurances give assurances?

The truth is that Netanyahu's fears are not all fantasies. The window shows also other injustices, other fires. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran are sworn enemies of Israel's existence, and they are flourishing. Is this really a trifling matter? There are racist rabbis in Israel, and may their matzah rise before their very eyes; but there are many more racist mullahs in Palestine and beyond. Why is it so hard to think humanely about the entirety of this conflict? Israel's critics, who are having the time of their life, have forgotten, or have chosen to forget, that unless sympathy for the predicament of the Palestinians is attended by sympathy for the predicament of the Israelis, it is not sympathy for peace. Anti-Zionism is not a contribution to the future. But here is Richard Falk, reporting to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva that Israel's use of force in Gaza was "potentially a crime against peace." A crime against peace! This is not the idea of a war crime, but the idea that war is a crime: is there any other state in the world that is arraigned for a want of pacifism? And those rockets from Gaza? Crimes against love, perhaps. And here is Roger Cohen in *The New York Times*, reporting glowingly and gullibly from Iran that its Jews are happy. He was there, so he knows. After all, they told him so. This is not quite of the same magnitude as, say, Owen Lattimore's report on the merry workers of Kolyma, but it is of the same tradition of willing dupes, and ideological tourists, and politically inspired pseudo-empiricism. All this is not decent and not helpful. I am reminded of David Ben-Gurion's old prescription for meeting a multiplicity of dangers, and so I propose to fight Avigdor Lieberman as if there is no Richard Falk and Richard Falk as if there is no Avigdor Lieberman.

Leon Wieseltier

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